

# College students moving online: On-campus student engagement in online courses

by

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B.A., Grand View College, 2000  
M.S., Kansas State University, 2003

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs  
College of Education

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Manhattan, Kansas

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## **Abstract**

On-campus college students are enrolling in online courses at a greater rate than ever before for a variety of reasons, from needing a more flexible schedule for work to keeping their degree progress on track when on-campus sections fill before they can enroll to utilizing a modern modality for coursework. In order for online courses to help students successfully meet learning outcomes, the courses need to be well-designed for all students, including on-campus students who may be more comfortable in on-campus classrooms and less skilled in how to learn and engage academically in online courses.

The purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of multiple participants who all participated in an online communications course, either as students earning on-campus degrees at the same institution, as teaching assistants, or as the faculty member at a mid-sized land grant institution in the midwestern United States. The participants were selected with both criterion- and purposeful-based sampling. The participants' experiences were viewed using the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Individuals' worlds are made of objects that may be physical, social, or abstract. The objects in this study are the elements within an online communications course; the participants shared about the elements that they perceived as most engaging.

The data collected from this study is useful in building more engagement into courses that have high on-campus student enrollments, which the literature indicates will continue to grow. Participants specifically shared the importance of course organization, strategic course relationships, and relevancy of content in creating the necessary engagement that helps students learn to not just endure but to embrace the subjects they are studying online.

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## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

Walking across a traditional college campus with a large number of Gen Z students, electronic devices are everywhere, from the smartphones that students carry while they walk to class to the smart watches on their wrists and the laptops that they use to do homework. It's not surprising, with a generation that grew up with computers in their homes and the internet available from the time they were infants, that college students today are one of the most technology-connected generations ever (Brown, 2018).

It's easy to assume that these students can open a computer, log into the Learning Management System (LMS), and navigate intuitively without pause. An academic advisor might show them where to log in during orientation, a faculty member in their first semester might have them submit a paper or take a quiz in the LMS, and they might find articles to read for a course or a video to watch as homework in the LMS. However, to students the LMS is just a tool – a platform or an app in which they upload, download, or view information. Connected or not, tech-savvy or not, an ability to log in is not the same as an ability to deeply engage and learn in a fully online course with no faculty member at the front of the room reading the faces and body language of students in the seats. A connected generation may struggle greatly in a disconnected online environment, alone in front of a computer instead of surrounded by a hundred peers, trying to interpret the learning experience in isolation.

### **Background Information**

Increasingly, on-campus students are enrolling in online courses (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015a; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2017). Traditional undergraduate students are working more in order to pay tuition as they take courses rather than accrue student loans (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2012). When work and school schedules collide, students

default to taking online courses that provide more flexibility by not requiring specific classroom attendance times. In addition, students are enrolling online when campus courses fill (Mann & Henneberry, 2012; Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009). Students are driven to graduate on time; rather than wait a full semester to enroll in an on-campus course that has reached its enrollment capacity, they enroll online if possible (Bound et al., 2012; Moore, 2016; Shea & Bidjerano, 2016). The cost of building new brick and mortar spaces to increase class sizes is prohibitive; therefore, it is becoming increasingly important for institutions of higher education to utilize online learning to keep up with student needs (Allen & Seaman, 2014). In order for online courses to help students successfully meet learning outcomes, the courses need to be well-designed for all students, including on-campus students who may be more comfortable in on-campus classrooms and less skilled in how to learn and engage academically in online courses.

Academic engagement is defined by how connected and involved students are with their courses, materials, instructors, and peers. Engagement has been linked to improved student learning outcomes, retention, and graduation rates (Kuh, 2009a; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Online student engagement improves when students take multiple online courses and in so doing, learn how to learn online (Richardson & Newby, 2006); however, students taking their first online course or two do not have time to develop the learning skills they need. Immediately immersed in the online course, they turn in assignments for a grade right away. With no prior experience in online courses, students may default to a preference for face-to-face instruction and be unwilling to engage in online learning (Fisher, 2010). The purpose of this case study research was to understand what aspects of online courses allow on-campus students to feel engaged enough with an online course to have a meaningful learning experience, thus benefitting academically.

## **History of Distance Education**

In order to understand online education's role in today's higher education system, it is important to understand the history of online education as it grew from previous distance education practices. Online education began as a method to reach students at a distance before it became commonly utilized at all levels of higher education. Distance education has a long history. In fact, modern forms of distance education have their roots in the 1800s (Verduin & Clark, 1991). The original intent of distance education was to educate those who could not reach campus physically (Waits & Lewis, 2003). The format of distance education has always been dictated by the technology available. Early formats focused on the written word transmitted via the postal service. As early as 1890, the University of Chicago created an extension division to handle distance student communications (Rumble, 1986). In the 1920s, radio carried educational content to the masses in the United States (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2000). Although this was largely a one-way transmission, it provided educational content for noncredit learning. Similarly, television ushered in a new medium, and starting in the 1930s, television programming carried educational content (Koenig & Hill, 1967). Soon after, Western Reserve University and New York University found ways to use television and the mail service to provide content for credit courses (Koenig & Hill, 1967).

With changes in technology, audio and video feeds could be broadcast to remote sites, providing live or pre-recorded content, so that students at a distance could attend group meetings synchronously and have a similar experience to traditional students (Waits & Lewis, 2003). By the mid-1970's, educators began utilizing email to supplement distance education courses, opening the door to online education (Harasim, 2000). The first "online" courses began in 1981 with short noncredit courses such as the Executive Education program through the Western

Behavioral Sciences Institute and “The Source” (Feenberg, 1993; Harasim, 2000). The first for-credit online courses appeared in 1984 in the form of undergraduate courses through the New Jersey Institute of Technology’s virtual classroom, and in 1985 Nova Southeastern University offered the first online graduate course (Harasim, 2000).

Soon, complete degree programs arrived, the first in 1986 as part of Connect-Ed through the New School of Social Research in New York, NY, and a second in 1989 through the University of Phoenix Online (Harasim, 2000). Courses would change significantly in the 1990s as home computers became more common and affordable and as the internet became less expensive and more reliable.

### **Distance Education Today**

Higher education institutions now offer a mixture of educational modalities due to the improved availability of high-speed internet between students and institutions. Distance education has become synonymous with online education since the internet facilitates an abundance of audio/video tools that allow for synchronous and asynchronous education. Students receive feedback from an instructor in hours, sometimes mere minutes, rather than waiting for the mail or trying to catch an instructor on the phone. Through the internet, students have access to text, audio, video, and even virtual worlds such as Second Life. Distance students have grown used to the technology and appreciate the quick access to information on their own schedules.

In the past decade, online education has grown exponentially. In 2002, 1.6 million students took at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Doyle, 2009). Jump to 2007 and 3.9 million students were enrolled in at least one online course, with most enrolling at an online course-offering institution within 40 miles of their home (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Doyle,

2009). In 2009, Doyle predicted that in the future most students would enroll exclusively online, and rather than enrolling close to home, they would truly be enrolled at a distance in institutions across the country.

According to data collected in the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 70.7% of all public degree-granting institutions in the United States today have some form of distance offerings, ranging from at least one for-credit course to entire degree programs (Allen & Seaman, 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015b). The number of online offerings increases considerably (to 95%) for those institutions serving more than 5,000 students. The institution used in this case study is a public four-year university serving more than 20,000 students; as reported above, this is a category of institutions that moved into online education earlier than most schools.

Online/distance education is growing in popularity with all students. Recent surveys show that as many as 32% of students ranked online education as better than face-to-face and 46% stated that it was equal in quality (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2015). According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 5.5 million students studied partially or exclusively online in 2014 (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2015); by the Fall of 2016, this number had reached 6.4 million (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018), which was the most recent data available at the time of this research. While the use of technology initially grew slowly over multiple decades to support physical classrooms, it is now clear that higher education is benefiting from courses and programs that exist solely in online environments.

### **Paradigm Shift**

Distance students are not the only students who take advantage of online education and courses. A paradigm shift has taken place over the last decade with more on-campus students



enrolling in online classrooms as well (Bejerano, 2008). These students walk between physical classrooms on a campus during the week and at various times of the day, evening, and weekend, they navigate their online courses. Student course schedules, which once listed classrooms, days, and times, are interrupted with “www” or “online course” to indicate that courses have asynchronous online meeting times versus synchronous physical meetings. Some have gone as far as predicting that the dichotomy of campus and “online” learning will disappear completely in the near future (Weidemann & Pollack, 2016).

While many articles state that online learning is largely a tool for distance education (Bejerano, 2008), it should be noted that some believe online education has best benefited on-campus students from the onset of online credit courses. In 2004, Carnevale suggested that online flexibility helped students with scheduling difficulties, but emphasized that students still needed face-to-face campus resources to truly succeed in an undergraduate program of any nature (Carnevale, 2004). His ideas, however, were based on a small sample of cases, and others, such as Li and Akins (2005), refuted his suggestions.

Data collected each year from higher education institutions assist in the effort to identify the number of on-campus and true distance students enrolled in online courses. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) requires institutions that accept federal financial aid to report credit enrollments to IPEDS (Allen & Seaman, 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015a; Poulin & Hill, 2014). For the first time, data in the 2013 report included information detailing which enrollments were online (Poulin & Hill, 2014). Unfortunately, there were some inaccuracies with how the data was reported in those early reports. Some institutions misinterpreted a statement from NCES asking them not to include enrollments for Continuing Education Units (CEUs) (non-credit courses that support licensure in various professions) and

mistakenly, those institutions did not count any courses from their continuing education departments, non-credit or credit (Poulin & Hill, 2014). Other institutions failed to report the enrollments of online students if their continuing education department was not funded by the state (Poulin & Hill, 2014). For example, one institution reviewed by Hill (2015) showed an increase in online student enrollments of 21,600 between the 2012 and 2013 data it reported to IPEDS; however, actual enrollment had changed little from year to year. The institution had merely changed its definition of online enrollments to meet that of IPEDS. This means that the 2013 data was severely limited and the 2014 data may need to be used as a baseline instead of the 2013 data, pushing administrators back one year until they can start to look for trends (Hill, 2015; Poulin & Hill, 2014). While early data may not be consistent, it is improving. In the spring of 2015, Straut and Poulin published three blog entries guiding professionals on how to best interpret IPEDS data for the Fall 2013 cohort and implications for online learning (Straut & Poulin, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), emphasizing that current trustworthy data indicates steady demand for online learning.

The Babson Survey Research Group (of Babson College), in partnership with the College Board (Allen & Seaman, 2015), gathers specific data focused on online learning. This group collects their data not from IPEDS, but through surveys asking qualitative and quantitative questions (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Data collected in 2014 and reported in 2015 (reports from IPEDS and Babson are always published during the following calendar year) includes information from 2,807 institutions of higher education that responded to the survey (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Until IPEDS began collecting data on online enrollments, Babson was the only reliable measurement of online metrics from 2002 to 2013 (Hill, 2015). While institutions are not required to respond (and Babson data includes fewer institutions than IPEDS), accuracy and

usefulness of the Babson data is highly regarded by those researching online education (Hill, 2015; Straut & Poulin, 2015a).

Combined, data from both IPEDS and Babson indicate that online course enrollments may be slowing for the first time in a decade (down to 3.7% growth during the 2013 fall semester), yet enrollment in online courses is still increasing at a greater rate than overall college course enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill, 2015; Seaman et al., 2018). Nationwide, on-campus students make up a significant number of online enrollments; this is true of the institution utilized for this case study as well.

At the midwestern public university where this case study research occurred, the unduplicated undergraduate headcount (each student is counted once) for the academic year 2017-2018 was 22,795; of these students, 19,359 were considered full-time students at this institution (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Traditional-aged students are often defined as undergraduate students between 18 and 24; 91% of the undergraduate students at this institution are under 24. While only 4.5% of undergraduate students at this midwestern institution were truly distance students, 17.1% of all enrolled undergraduate students took at least one online course in addition to their on-campus coursework. Thus, by number, more campus students are utilizing online learning than distance students at this campus.

This institution is not alone. Ninety percent of students who take some online education courses are attending public institutions, indicating that public institutions are responsible for providing a great deal of content to online learners, content that is often used by students attending on campus (Straut & Poulin, 2015a). By the fall of 2013, 12.5% of students enrolled in higher education were taking courses exclusively online and at least 25% of all students enrolled in higher education took at least one online course (Straumsheim, 2015).

Older studies suggested that students took online courses secondary to face-to-face courses, such as when on-campus courses were full or when students needed a flexible schedule around their work commitments (Mann & Henneberry, 2012; Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009). New literature indicates that students regard online courses as equivalent to on-campus courses, albeit in a different format (McHaney, 2011). Studies show that students expect to utilize modern modalities and take online courses in college, even if their program is primarily built upon face-to-face coursework (Harasim, 2000; Kirtman, 2009).

### **Rationale for the Study**

Today's higher education environment is increasingly concerned about graduation rates (Hajrasouliha, 2017; Supiano, 2015; "Will the push for higher graduation rates affect admissions requirements?," 2016), student retention (Boulton, 2016; Hoover, 2015; Stuart, 2016), and decreasing the time to degree for students so that they can enter the workforce sooner with less college debt (Bound et al., 2012; Moore, 2016; Shea & Bidjerano, 2016). Institutions need to lay an educational foundation that will help students prepare for the complex challenges of professions and careers of the 21st century (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2007; Kegan, 1994). As Baxter Magolda (2008, p. 269) states, "employers expect higher education to help college students achieve these capacities." One way to ensure that students are prepared for the workforce is to make sure that they are meeting the learning outcomes of the curriculum, which is designed to teach them critical skills. While engagement in online courses can help students meet learning outcomes, research on how to create this online engagement with pedagogical design features and best practices does not currently exist. Thus, understanding from students' perspectives what elements of online courses engage them is critical in developing effective online courses in which students meet learning outcomes.

## **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of two on-campus undergraduate students who took, engaged with, and continued to enroll in online courses. To explore the case more fully, similar questions were asked of two of the teaching assistants and the instructor. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What were the experiences of on-campus students who enrolled in online courses?
2. What aspects of an online course engaged on-campus students?
3. How did the participants discuss their motivation to continue participating in online courses based on previous course engagement?

## **Methodology**

Qualitative research creates a greater understanding of peoples' relationships with systems and allows real world application regarding the rules or structures created (Bredo, 2006). Unlike quantitative researchers who collect data through instruments and focus on data represented through numbers (Flick, 2007), the active qualitative researcher places himself in the world or environment being researched (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Because qualitative researchers are in the environment being researched, they can focus on understanding how people (participants) interpret their daily lives and how they construct meaning from their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Learning what meaning students assign to elements they engage with in online courses in their own words needs documented and shared, a process at which qualitative research excels.

I chose the case study approach as the methodology for my study. A case study approach is appropriate when examining a contemporary phenomenon such as the current enrollment of on-campus students (Yin, 2006, 2014). It allows researchers to investigate the contemporary

phenomenon extensively to gather rich data in a setting that is natural to the participants (Yin, 2014, 2018).

This research is a case study investigation of one phenomenon: on-campus student engagement in an online communications course. This case was bounded by a single online course that enrolls a high number of on-campus students. This study includes four points of data collection. First, interviews were held with two participants, students, who share the common experience of enrolling in online courses while earning on-campus degrees. Second, interviews were held with the instructor and two teaching assistants of the course. Third, data was collected from the course itself (LMS data that measured the amount of time students spent participating in the online course). Fourth, I collected and reviewed the syllabus (with the instructor's permission). With both students' permission, I was able to see how much time they spent accessing the course materials compared to other students in the course. The syllabus helped illustrate how the course was structured. Data was collected over the span of 10 months and totaled 373 pages.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework is used as a lens to view and interpret data. The theoretical framework chosen for this case study is symbolic interactionism. Individuals' worlds are made of objects that may be physical, social (other individuals), or abstract. Symbolic interactionism is based on three premises, according to Blumer (1969), who defined the theory: first, human beings act toward objects in regards to the meaning that object has for them; second, human interaction with others is how humans develop the meaning of objects; and third, meaning comes from an interpretive process used by humans interacting with the objects that they encounter. Rooted in symbolic interactionism, this research views engagement in online courses through the

eyes and experiences of those who took and led an online course. The researcher sought to understand what objects in that online course engaged students by conveying the meaning of those objects in this research as ascertained from the participants themselves.

### **Adding Value**

This study adds value by including Merriam's (Merriam, 2009) three special features required of case study research. This research is particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic, all of which have not been pursued in the literature about this topic at this time. (Merriam, 2009). To be particularistic, this study focuses on the current phenomenon of on-campus student enrollment in online courses. This study describes that phenomenon from the context of students who take an active role in that phenomenon, the intentions of the faculty member who developed the course, and from the objective data collected by the LMS. To be heuristic, this study enhances the reader's understanding of this phenomenon through the lenses of students, participants who lived these experiences. Quantitative data on student enrollment is available from national associations and clearinghouses (Allen & Seaman, 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015a; Seaman et al., 2017), but we have no personal information from students and how they personally interpret engagement in their online courses, which this research adds.

### **Operational Definitions**

The terms used in this research help differentiate populations of students (distance and local) as well as the courses available to students (face-to-face and online). In addition, the terms are used to specify the population of students being discussed; I define them below.

#### **On-campus Students and Peers**

For the purpose of this research, I use the term "on-campus student" to refer to students who are physically living on or near campus and who are enrolled in programs taught primarily

through face-to-face classroom contact with faculty members. These students' programs of study rely completely on courses offered on campus and face-to-face, and in many cases, on-campus students complete 100% of their programs in face-to-face classrooms. When on-campus students discuss peers, I use the term "on-campus peers" to indicate that the peers are on-campus students.

### **On-campus Courses**

A course is classified as face-to-face when less than 29% of the content is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015a). The remainder of the content is delivered in person to the student in a classroom or similar educational setting. I use the term "on-campus courses" to refer to courses that students are taking face-to-face. The term "on-campus courses" was used by students in my research and it is a term with which they are most familiar.

### **Distance Students**

"Distance students" are students who are enrolled in degrees facilitated solely through distance learning (Ortagus, 2014). These students live off campus and learn online. Distance learning is an educational modality that utilizes technology in order to distribute information with course content and substantive interaction (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015b). Some distance students may travel to campus periodically; however, they can complete most of their degrees solely online.

### **Online Peers**

The distance students in an online course are called "online peers." On-campus students taking an online course have on-campus peers enrolled in a course; in addition, they have "online peers" enrolled who are physically located elsewhere. Rather than call all the students in a



course “online peers,” I use this term to refer solely to students not on campus in order to differentiate between local and distance students and the relationship they have with one another.

### **Online Courses**

A course is defined as an “online course” if at least 80% of the content is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015a). Bejerano (2008) further describes online education as computer-mediated, free of a set location, time-flexible, and often asynchronous. In this environment, there is no incentive to meet with other students or faculty members face-to-face.

### **Home Institution**

“Home institution” refers to the student’s institution that will grant his or her degree. The campus in my case study is located near other institutions and the students I interviewed discussed taking courses at other institutions. If they wished to, they could take courses on campus or online from multiple institutions.

### **Traditional Students**

“Traditional students” enroll in an undergraduate bachelor’s degree program immediately after completing high school and attend college full time (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015b). If a student continues to be enrolled full time, it is expected that they will begin college between the ages of 18-19 and complete college around the age of 23.

### **Learning Management System**

A “Learning Management System” (LMS) is the product used to deploy an online course. Universities use an LMS to organize online learning. Within this system are many online courses in which students may participate; it serves as the classroom. Within the LMS for each course are the course documents, often including a syllabus and assignments. The course may

include teaching documents such as videos, an online textbook, or basic text files. Faculty members can use a gradebook in the LMS to track student outcomes.

### **Discussion Boards**

Within the course structure in the LMS, faculty members often set up a “discussion board.” This is a place where students can post and respond to comments. A thread (collection of postings and responses) is often started with the faculty member posting a talking point or question requiring students to respond. Students may communicate with each other with written text in the discussion board.

### **Summary**

Over the past century, distance education has been utilized as a tool to revolutionize all of higher education (McHaney, 2011). As distance education has moved online, the use of technology has enhanced current distance education practices to create a more interactive environment (Rovai, 2001; Rumble, 2001). As more online courses have become available, on-campus students increasingly enroll in them concurrently with their campus courses, during intersessions, or over the summer (Allen & Seaman, 2015).

Research into best practices in online teaching has not kept up with the growth of online courses and enrollments. Students may be utilizing online courses, but are they engaging in them and meeting intended learning outcomes? Understanding this situation requires more than quantitative data. Numbers only tell a part of this story and for deeper understanding, this qualitative case study explores interviews with traditional, on-campus undergraduate students to better understand their experiences with, engagement in, and motivation to continue participating in online courses. Each student has a story to share. By sharing two such stories here, this study expands the literature on understanding what engages on-campus students in online courses.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

This chapter situates the research study within the literature and provides a foundation for the study. With online enrollments increasing yearly, the literature identifies several recognized reasons for why on-campus students enroll online. Enrolling in an online course is just the first step in knowledge acquisition, however. To truly learn new material by taking a course, students need to engage with it. In addition to increasing learning, positive engagement results in better grades, greater student satisfaction, and higher retention (Chen, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2008).

Alexander Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement adds richness to our understanding of engagement; he goes beyond the idea that engagement is time spent and focuses on the fact that students make a personal investment in, or place personal value in, that in which they are engaged. Vincent Tinto's work on retention and student persistence illustrates the necessity of classroom engagement.

Beyond research on engagement in higher education in general, the next step is to discuss what research has been conducted specifically on engagement within a course. The existing research focuses primarily on blended learning (Gounari & Koutropoulos, 2015), on the differences in on-campus students' and distance learners' ability to adapt to online learning (Xie, Lin, & Zhang, 2001), on interactions between on-campus and distance students in online courses (Miwa & Wang, 2011), or on reasons associated with why students are unable to complete online physics courses (Murphy & Stewart, 2017). No literature focuses on the engagement experiences of on-campus students in online courses, nor was literature found regarding why on-campus students may choose to continue to take online courses based on their previous engagement levels. No similar research has been conducted on this topic.

Considering the literature gap that exists, using a qualitative case study approach leads to a deeper understanding of on-campus student engagement in online courses and allows educators to understand student needs.

### **Online Enrollments**

Many on-campus students have moved online for some of their coursework with or without the input of their advisors or faculty mentors (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Mann & Henneberry, 2012; Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009). This is a growing trend (Hill, 2015; Straumsheim, 2014, 2015). In fact, today's high school students are already planning to take a blended learning approach to college, intending to take online courses as part of their on-campus degree programs (Schaffhauser, 2015).

Seaman, Allen, and Seaman (2018), reporting on data collected by the Babson Survey Research Group, shared that 6.4 million students (31.6% of higher education enrollments) took online courses during the Fall 2016 semester, a significant increase from the 3.4 million on-campus students (16.7% of all higher education enrollments) enrolled in online courses during the Fall 2012 semester. According to IPEDS data, on-campus students are now regularly enrolling in online courses at their own institutions in addition to signing up for online courses at other institutions with the intent of transferring the credit back to their home institutions (Hill, 2015; Straumsheim, 2014). It appears that on-campus students are taking advantage of courses that were created for online and distance students, realizing that online education is on par with face-to-face education (Fredericksen, 2015; Hill, 2015). College students are self-selecting into online courses even though they reside or commute regularly to a physical campus where the same courses are offered in person (Mann & Henneberry, 2012; Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009).

## **On-campus Demand for Online Courses**

During the last two decades, several researchers have provided two possible explanations for why on-campus students take online courses: schedule flexibility (Orszag, Orszag, & Whitmore, 2015) and the appeal of technology (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robinson, 2009). Whereas early research pointed to the former reason (Mann & Henneberry, 2012; Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009), emphasizing students' need for a flexible schedule, current literature suggests that the latter is equally important, that students simply appreciate technology as a learning environment (Levine, Dean, & Levine, 2012; McHaney, 2011).

### **Schedule Flexibility**

Asynchronous online courses do not have a set daily starting or ending time and a student can schedule his or her coursework around other schedules (such as a work schedule). It is more common than ever for students to be employed while in college, both during online or on-campus programs (Beldarrain, 2006; Levine et al., 2012; O'Malley & McCraw, 1999; Orszag et al., 2015; Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009; Soares, 2013). In 2014, around 40% of full-time college students were employed at least part-time, and in a more recent study, 82% of students stated that they must work in some capacity to afford staying in college (Soares, 2013). As Kulm and Cramer (2006) noted, it is academically beneficial for some students to work between 10 to 20 hours per week, but work can easily get in the way of scheduling face-to-face courses, or vice versa, and course times may interfere with work schedules (Orszag et al., 2015). Students are working to afford their education, but it is still important for them to graduate on time in order to enter the workforce quickly and minimize their student debt (Levine et al., 2012).

Schedule flexibility alludes to constraints of time and physical space. Roger McHaney, author of *The New Digital Shoreline: How Web 2.0 and Millennials Are Revolutionizing Higher Education* (2011), has suggested that schedule flexibility is more suitable for some students' personalities and learning styles, especially if they wish to be more active at night or in early morning. By putting educational content online, students may access it at any time. Students in the same course may access message boards and content whenever it is optimal for them, yet still share the same academic space with others (McHaney, 2011), accessing online course information at their convenience with minimal limitations (Dutton, Dutton, & Perry, 2002; Gebhardt, 2001).

Not only can students access the course content when it is convenient, the research indicates that students can spend time accessing some material online as often as they need to if they are weak in an area, or move through other content more quickly than a lecturer may allow if they are already strong in an area (Chamberlin, 2001; Kirtman, 2009; Lei & Gupta, 2010; McHaney, 2011). McHaney (2011) referred to these students as time shifters, speeding up lectures in their online video player if they know the content already to avoid latency intolerance, which has been defined by Hayes (2008) as the anxiety one has when information is coming much slower than anticipated considering the power of modern technology. Students are scheduling their academic time around activities and are spending as much, or as little, time on academics as they feel is required of them.

### **Ease of Technology Usage**

One of the possible reasons to explain increased online enrollments by traditional students is that they are simply more comfortable with the technology than their predecessors; in addition, they have a higher acceptance rate of the merit of online education versus course

material taught in traditional physical classrooms (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Armatas, Holt, & Rice, 2003; Bejerano, 2008; Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2009; Levine et al., 2012; McHaney, 2011; Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001). Students today have grown up with collaborative web technologies and social media, making them comfortable with and accepting of such technology as an appropriate learning environment. Schaffhauser (2015) reported a 10% drop in the number of students planning to take all of their courses on campus. Approximately 30% of high school students stated that they would expect to do some portion of their degree online, even though they are attending on-campus programs (Levine et al., 2012; Schaffhauser, 2015). Students are showing a preference for a blended-learning approach to education over traditional programs that are exclusively face-to-face classroom experiences (Levine et al., 2012; Soares, 2013). Even those traditional students who may not be as embedded in online media are still accepting new modern formats of learning with online tools and they would like to learn with others who know how to use the technology and with faculty members who know how to implement it well (J. L. Brown, 2012; Levine et al., 2012; McHaney, 2011; Schaffhauser, 2015; Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999).

Additionally, technology allows students the ability to interact with the educational environment on their own terms. Students feel they can more effectively communicate certain topics through online message boards than in a face-to-face discussion (Lei & Gupta, 2010; McHaney, 2011; Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009). Discussing topics online allows for perceived anonymity that is not afforded in a face-to-face lecture, and moving those discussions online reduces personal risks while increasing engagement levels (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2009).

There are additional benefits to online learning when compared to the same course taught in a campus environment. Online, unlike in a classroom, students can be required to respond to all questions, which strengthens course discussions, thus increasing students' ownership and responsibility for knowing the content (Chamberlin, 2001; Fredericksen, 2015). Additionally, online education and communication can level the playing field by removing psychological and social barriers to communications between students (with each other or with instructors) (Chamberlin, 2001).

### **Student-Driven Enrollment Research**

Few of the studies referenced above directly sought student input; most data have come from information collected on student behaviors. Two studies have focused on on-campus student enrollment in online courses and student motivations, seeking firsthand student input: Pastore and Carr-Chellman (2009) and Mann and Henneberry (2012). Both pairs researched the reasons why on-campus students enroll in online courses by surveying college students. Pastore and Carr-Chellman (2009) surveyed students within 40 miles of Penn State University to find out why they were taking online courses. Mann and Henneberry (2012) did a broad survey of all campus students, seeking reasons to explain why on-campus students were taking online courses. Neither study focused specifically on on-campus traditional college students, nor did they seek qualitative feedback.

Pastore and Carr-Chellman (2009), in a survey of 408 students at Penn State University, found that the most common reasons for campus students to take online courses were: (1) the flexibility to attend online around their work/family schedules and (2) the convenience of studying from any location. In addition, they found that 25% of participants in their study enrolled online due to the lack of on-campus seats in courses that were taught both online and on



campus. Pastore and Carr-Chellman asked students questions regarding misconceptions of online education, including time spent on classwork, the ease of online courses compared to on-campus courses, and participants' disposition to favor online learning. The results were found to be insignificant. They suggested that future research on this topic include a qualitative study with interviews in order to allow participants to go into more detail as to why they chose to take online courses and to offer insights unexpected by the researcher.

Mann and Henneberry (2012) used a survey to find out what traits/characteristics of a student increase the likelihood of that student enrolling online. Mann and Henneberry used an ordered logistical regression model and a Likert scale in a survey sent to all students on campus at Oklahoma State University in 2010. The goal was to better understand what characteristics led students to take online courses (year in college, degree plan, residency, and familiarity with web technology). They found that undergraduate and graduate business-degree-seeking students were most likely to take online courses and that engineering majors and graduate students in many science degrees were least likely. Many students surveyed were taking online courses as a way to save money over enrolling on campus as an out-of-state student (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). Mann and Henneberry found that there was a strong relationship between online enrollment and students who favored interactive web technology. What made their study stand out was that they examined each student's degree plan and other demographic elements not studied by Pastore and Carr-Chellman (2009) and used Biglan (1973) categories to find commonalities between degree plans. The study, published in 2012, introduced the concern over tuition charges to the discussion by asking students about their residency.

## **Critics of Online Learning**

Some researchers are worried about online enrollment trends; they believe that: (1) students must be much better disciplined to work online than colleges or universities have prepared them to be (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Bejerano, 2008; J. L. Brown, 2012), (2) faculty members believe online education is less engaging (Bejerano, 2008), (3) it can be challenging to help students learn higher level thinking skills (Bejerano, 2008), and (4) the lack of physical/social engagement may be detrimental to student engagement (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Some students feel that online education is of poor quality (Bejerano, 2008; Straumsheim, 2016); in one survey, 27% of student respondents did not feel that online education was of good quality (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2015). Others have proven many of these assumptions are false (Benton, Webster, Gross, & Pallett, 2010) or that it is wrong to compare online and on-campus classroom education because the audience may differ for the two modes (Fredericksen, 2015). Regardless of what researchers and faculty members believe, the fact is that on-campus students are taking online courses more often.

Although we know how many students enroll online and have a sense of why they do, no research has looked beyond on-campus student motivation to enroll in online courses towards actual course engagement by students. In order to understand what students are getting out of the online experience, research needs to probe deeper into the elements of online learning that engage students.

## **Engagement**

Once students are enrolled in online courses, regardless of the reason, it is important that the courses lead to student learning. Student engagement is essential to successful student learning (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). When students are engaged with their courses, students

increase their chances of successfully meeting learning outcomes. Learning outcomes and student success are increasingly important on college campuses. Ideally, students will learn, stay enrolled, and finish their degree. Any hiccups can lead to poor grades and students getting off track. In today's detailed degree plans, each course is important. Considering that online education is becoming an increasingly indispensable part of higher education, engagement of students in online courses is of the utmost importance (Meyer, 2014).

Retention-related literature illustrates the importance of engagement. Many plans to retain and graduate students include student engagement as a critical need (Kuh, 2009b; Meyer, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), but most plans and models are focused on physical classrooms and involvement in the campus environment (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1990; Kuh, 2009b; Tinto, 1993). Literature in the field of student affairs tends to define engagement as how active students are in their academic programs (generally) as well as their involvement in activities on campus (in the department as well as in student life). Positive engagement results in better grades, greater student satisfaction, and higher retention (Chen et al., 2008).

In addition to being defined at the campus level, engagement can be defined at a course level as well. A basic definition of classroom engagement could be how much interest a student has in his or her course (Dewey, 1913). Specific classroom engagement, at the micro level, influences student learning outcomes for programs, student satisfaction, and overall college retention (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Carini et al., 2006; Pilotti, Anderson, Hardy, Murphy, & Vincent, 2017). George Kuh (2009b), one of the leading figures in engagement theory as related to the practice of student affairs, offers this more elaborate definition of academic engagement in a classroom:

[T]he more students study a subject, the more they know about it, and the more students practice and get feedback from faculty and staff members on their writing and collaborative problem solving, the deeper they come to understand what they are learning. (p. 5)

This definition suggests that students' investment of time, as well as their level of interest, motivation, and participation, leads to positive engagement within a course, resulting in better grades and greater subject comprehension (Bulger, Mayer, Almeroth, & Blau, 2008; Kuh, 2009b; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Alexander Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement adds to our understanding of student engagement and its role in retaining students. The term "involvement," as used by Astin, is synonymous with engagement; "engage in" is one of the terms he suggests that captures the intended meaning of "involvement." Student involvement refers to the "amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 518). An involved student is one who is spending his or her time on campus studying and participating in campus activities. Astin evokes Freud's term "cathexis," investing psychological energy in items other than themselves. A student who is involved has invested his or her psychological energy in academic pursuits and the effort or time involved is rewarded with academic success. What makes Astin's use of the term "involvement" stand out is that it transcends the idea that engagement is time spent and focuses on the fact that students make a personal investment in, or place personal value in, that in which they are engaged. The students' behavior reflects this investment.

Astin's theory has five postulates, or assumptions:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination).
2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same students manifest different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.

(Astin, 1984, p. 519)

The last two postulates directly highlight the importance of academic engagement. Astin suggests that practitioners strive to develop academic involvement in students to help them achieve academic outcomes. The theory of student involvement does not provide a template for faculty members to use in order to improve teaching methods; rather, the theory encourages educators to focus on observing student actions and modifying teaching techniques. Astin

suggests that faculty members focus on student behaviors and use methods that evoke student involvement. According to Astin, the increase in student engagement, a psychological investment in addition to time spent on activities, improves the students' success in their courses. While Astin was likely considering course success in the context of on-campus courses, this theory can apply to online as well.

More recently, Vincent Tinto's work on retention and student persistence strengthens the idea of the necessity of classroom engagement. Although his research focuses on the larger college environment and the effects on student retention (first year experiences, personal transitions to college, larger academic goals, and other personal concerns), Tinto recognizes the importance of each classroom (Tinto, 1997, 2012, 2017a, 2017b). Tinto discusses the importance of setting clear expectations, supporting students, providing appropriate assessment feedback, and engaging students' academic needs to increase involvement (Tinto, 2012). Tinto shares concerns that while engagement starts with curriculum choices, "student motivation to persist is also shaped by student perceptions of the value of what they are being asked to learn" (Tinto, 2017a, p. 5). Students engage less with courses outside their area of study, that do not have meaningful connections with their own lives, and that are of no relevance to their selves or pursuits (Tinto, 2017a). What differs between Tinto and Astin is that Tinto focuses more on programmatic offerings in the classroom than on the importance of personal, psychological engagement of students on a per course basis. Much of Tinto's work focuses on programs, or on groups of courses put together to increase student persistence, and these often involve outside resources such as mentors (Tinto, 1997).

Student engagement, ranging from the course level to the university level, is critical for student success, but which elements of online courses specifically engage students is unknown.

At this time, there is little literature regarding the assessment of course engagement and whether current pedagogical practices are working to the students' benefit; instead, literature primarily focuses on the need for engagement but does not assess course behaviors. The existing research focuses on on-campus students in physical classrooms with engagement elements that can only be utilized in person (Bulger et al., 2008; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Gasiewski, Eagan, Garcia, Hurtado, & Chang, 2012; Kim & Lundberg, 2016; Tinto, 1997; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Zumbunn, McKim, Buhs, & Hawley, 2014) or engagement elements that lead to distance students' success in online communities, but not engagement elements within the courses themselves (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Chen et al., 2008; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). In most cases, research regarding course engagement tends to be dominated by faculty members' viewpoints (Tinto, 1997) or transcript analysis of course elements (email communications and discussion boards) rather than students' lived experiences with those elements (Garrison et al., 1999; Pilotti et al., 2017; Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999). As Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010, p. 8) point out in the ten year review of their work on online learning communities, course data "does not reveal all the complex variables of context, personality, discipline and timing that make up a unique educational transaction." What's missing in the literature is rich data, specifically from on-campus students' viewpoints, about student experiences with online learning.

At this time, no research has been conducted to find out what engages on-campus students in online courses. Bolliger and Wasilik (2012) came close in their study of an online course taken by on-campus students. In their 2012 quantitative study, the students surveyed reported that they were satisfied with the course they took online, but not with the learning outcomes or the course subject (statistics). Bolliger and Wasilik (2012) did not have an answer

for why students said they were satisfied with the course when the course had little interaction between the faculty member or other students. This illustrates once again the need for research on the engagement of on-campus students in online courses that is not based on faculty members' conjecture or retention data, but on the real experiences of on-campus students who have participated in, felt engaged with, and chosen to continue to enroll in online courses due to their past course engagement. Ideally, future research will show what elements of online courses effectively engage students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Symbolic interactionism is the sociological perspective that suggests that humans rely on shared symbols to create their own realities, and that in order to understand individuals' behavior (in this case students'), researchers must focus on how individuals construct their reality and make meaning of events. The symbols can be events, relationships, objects, or abstract ideas. This perspective looks at social systems, events, and objects from a small scale, the individual point of view, and how humans assign meaning to objects in order to decide how to interact with them. This meaning can be combined with others' meaning to understand broader trends. Although over a century old, symbolic interactionism is relevant in current research (Davetian, 2010; Vrasidas, 2001). Symbolic interactionism creates a framework for research that guides our exploration of data and shapes it into useful information that represents the experiences of others and makes it relevant to our work.

Herbert Blumer (1969) coined the term "symbolic interactionism" in 1937; however, the notion was based on the works of George Herbert Mead (1934), Charles Horton Cooley (Cooley, 1902), John Dewey (1913), and many others (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). The origins of symbolic interactionism continue back to the 1800's to Charles Sanders Peirce and the American



pragmatism movement (Davetian, 2010). Davetian explains that it was Mead who defined reality as neither absolute nor separate from human constructs. Reality, instead, is based in perspectives and interpretations of those who interact with it. Blumer was a student of Mead's and shaped symbolic interactionism into what is used across many disciplines today.

According to Blumer (1969, p. 1), symbolic interactionism is a “relatively distinctive approach to the study of human group life and human conduct.” Blumer (1969) states that symbolic interactionism is based on three premises: first, human beings act toward an object in regards to the meaning that object has for them; second, human interaction with others is how humans develop the meaning of objects; and third, meaning comes from an interpretive process used by humans interacting with the objects they encounter. Under Blumer's (1969) first premise, that human beings act toward objects in regard to the meaning that the object has for them, the object has no meaning on its own, but rather it is given meaning by the individual. The individual is separate from the world around him or her. Considering Blumer's (1969) second premise, meaning can be developed through interactions with others. Social interactions allow for the sharing of meanings; the same object can have a different meaning for different people. The sharing of meanings does not necessarily lead individuals to change their own meanings, however. Blumer's (1969) third premise, that meaning comes from an interpretive process and can change, indicates that humans have freedom in the meaning they give objects, and the meaning is an interpretation of social norms and cultural expectations. The interaction with others may change our meaning through experiences.

Blumer wanted to refute many of his contemporaries' beliefs in realism. A cloud isn't just a cloud. Instead, psychologists and sociologists in the late 1960s were starting to realize that people prescribe meaning to the cloud based on many reasons, from previous interactions with it

to feelings based on their unique worldviews. In addition to people creating meaning internally (a process Blumer describes as occurring all day, every day), people create meaning when they interact as a society. Blumer (1969, p. 17) puts a great deal of emphasis on the interlinkages of actions humans have with one another, saying that “Such articulation of lines of action gives rise to and constitutes ‘joint action’- a societal organization of conduct of different acts of diverse participants.” Some joint actions (interactions such as when we buy something at a store and talk to the clerk, for example), are predictable and repeatable. Others, such as politicians attempting to avoid a war, are not predictable. An individual’s joint actions, although not necessarily predictable, are almost always rooted in their past decisions and experiences. Thus, whether we are interacting with ourselves or others, we are always making meaning internally and choosing our actions based on a rich and complex personal history that adapts and changes based on interactions with others.

It is important, Blumer (1969) states, for the researcher to view the objects as participants see them, or how they personally interpret the object’s meaning. Our use of the objects, such as elements within an online course, depends greatly on how the students give, discuss, and interpret their meanings. We should not assume that our meaning is the meaning that others use, especially when we do not share the experiences of others.

Today, the works of sociologists such as Arlie Hochschild (1997) or David Snow and Leon Anderson (Snow & Anderson, 1992) demonstrate just how relevant symbolic interactionism is in how a case study can reveal important data about broader trends. Symbolic interactionism has expanded outside of sociology and across academia, playing an important role in the health sciences (Handberg, Thorne, Midtgaard, Nielsen, & Lomborg, 2015) and education (Stake, 2005). This research study reveals trends using symbolic interactionism to explore a case

and shed light on the importance of student experiences in an online course. Individual meaning making processes are discussed with individuals, and each individual is a point of data.

### **Summary**

Data from the last two decades indicate that online enrollments are increasing every year, especially from students who are taking courses both online and on campus (Seaman et al., 2018). Many researchers have explored the reasons why on-campus students enroll in online courses. Students are motivated to take online courses to meet the demands of their schedule; at the same time, the technology supporting online courses is familiar to them. In the last decade, researchers have begun asking students themselves (in a quantitative format) about their intent to enroll online.

Researchers disagree on the effectiveness of online learning when compared to the learning that occurs in traditional physical classrooms. Faculty members and students have mixed views about the quality of online learning. One way to improve online course quality is to ensure that online courses engage students, with a special focus on engaging on-campus students who have taken few (if any) online courses in the past.

Higher education engagement theory, although primarily focused on student involvement outside the classroom, can be applied to learning and success within the classroom as well. Many agree that classroom engagement is important; however, research in this area often paints a broad stroke over general online course engagement or focuses too deeply on specific elements within a course. Additional research from students' perspective, seeking their input on engagement at the course level, is essential and missing from the current literature body.

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

Qualitative research aids our understanding of routines and problems by allowing a researcher to obtain a sense of participants in their own words and expressions. Researchers studying a case with multiple participants who have shared experiences (Merriam, 2009) are able to weave these experiences together as a bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), highlighting commonalities in order to better understand the motivations and experiences of a population of individuals. Together, the experiences bring new meaning and understanding to light, allowing a researcher to fill in the gaps between the theories, quantitative data, and the lived realities of students (Guba, 1996; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

The purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of two on-campus undergraduate students who took, engaged with, and continued to enroll in, online courses. To explore the case more fully, similar questions were asked of two of the teaching assistants and the instructor. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What are the experiences of on-campus students who have enrolled in online courses?
2. What aspects of an online course engage on-campus students?
3. How do the participants discuss their motivation to continue participating in online courses based on previous course engagement?

### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is used to explore the relationships that participants have with systems, creating a greater understanding of real world application regarding the rules or structures we create (Bredo, 2006). Unlike quantitative researchers who collect data through instruments and focus on data represented through numbers (Flick, 2007), the active qualitative researcher places himself or herself in the world or environment being researched (Creswell,

2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative researchers focus on understanding how people (participants) interpret their daily lives and how they construct meaning from their experiences (Merriam, 2009). The researcher becomes immersed in the participants' environment to understand what they are doing and how they relate to one another according to Thomas Schwandt (1999, p. 451), because, as Kenneth Gergen (1988, p. 47) stated, "understanding is not contained within me, or within you, but in that which we generate together in our form of relatedness." Important elements are not predetermined by the researcher and additional elements come to light that may not have been expected when the study was first designed. The participant helps the researcher navigate through his or her experiences, thus allowing data to arise naturally.

The qualitative researcher collects the empirical materials of the world, including life stories, artifacts, and documents as data (represented through notes, interviews, conversations, and recordings) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The researcher adheres to the strict protocol outlined by his or her own particular methods. It is, as Yin (2014, p. 3) has called it, a "rigorous methodological path." Qualitative researchers take an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world, not changing what they are studying, only seeking understanding of the world in its natural state through the participants who live and participate in the world or the environment being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As Flick states, researchers look for the formal organization or patterns within the existing environment (2007).

The practice of qualitative research started with the traditional movement of the early 1900s and has evolved to its current state, the "future" movement, which is highly concerned with moral discourse (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The term "qualitative research" originally signified research that was not quantitative, but has since become characterized by its own

distinct features as well as by the ways in which empirical material is analyzed and data is constructed (Flick, 2007). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) discussed that early qualitative research in the 1920s emphasized the intersection of social context and biography and the roots of holistic or naturalistic research (as cited in Merriam, 2009). Egon Guba (1978) focused the field on research that is naturalistic, the opposite of research that is done in a controlled laboratory setting. It remains important that the investigator or researcher does not manipulate what is being studied (Merriam, 2009). While the areas of anthropology and sociology dominated early qualitative research, the 1970s and 1980s saw great growth in qualitative publications and journals, leading to the continued development of the field, including many works in the field of education (Merriam, 2009).

### **Methodological Framework**

This case study was grounded in the four elements of methodological framework as described by Crotty (1998): (1) theoretical perspective, which grounds the methodology in a philosophical logic and criterion; (2) epistemology, the theory of knowledge that provides perspective to construct meaning; (3) methodology, a strategic plan of action underlying methods of collecting data to reach the desired outcomes in line with the theoretical perspective and epistemology; and (4) methods, the process used to collect and analyze data congruent to the needs of a research question (Crotty, 1998). This study was grounded in the theoretical perspective, or framework, of symbolic interactionism and an epistemology of social constructionism.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework is the lens used to view and interpret data. This is how the data is collected individually before meaning is made through epistemology. The theoretical

framework for this case study is symbolic interactionism. Individuals' worlds are made of objects that may be physical, social (other individuals), or abstract. According to Blumer (1969), it is important for the researcher to view the objects as participants see them or as participants personally interpret the objects' meaning. Researchers should pay close attention to those objects that carry the most weight or meaning for participants.

### **Epistemology**

Construction of the methodological framework begins with epistemology (Crotty, 1998). The epistemological view used for this study is social constructionism, which better allows us to understand the world, reality, and meaning that participants share when reflecting on their educational structure (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln et al., 2011). Researchers should seek to understand the participants' subjective meaning of their experiences and decision-making processes and to develop a pattern of meaning (Creswell, 2007) from the academic experiences that participants share (Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1985). Shor (1992) noted that an individual's sense of what he or she knows and his or her individuality is influenced heavily by experiences with others. A social constructionist paradigm drove this research to learn how each participant subjectively perceived her environment (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln et al., 2011). Each participant may have had a unique perception of reality, but they shared commonalities in their mental construction of events (Guba, 1990). These commonalities help construct meaning.

### **Research Design**

A case study approach serves as the methodology for this study. It allows researchers to investigate a case extensively and in a setting that is natural to the participants (Yin, 2014). It allows for the detailed investigation of one phenomenon (in this case, an online intersession

course) that included multiple participants who shared the common experience of participating in the online communications course (Borman, Clarke, Cotner, & Lee, 2006; Huberman & Miles, 1994; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2006). The case study research methodology allowed a thorough exploration of what engages on-campus students from many different points of view. Each participant is unique; in addition, they are each a variation of the larger general phenomenon being studied and together can be considered to capture an understanding of many similar individuals in similar circumstances (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Shavelson & Towne, 2002; Stake, 2005). Rather than looking only at quantitative student data, interviews and discussions with multiple participants allowed a better understanding of their situations in detail and from many angles (Flick, 1998; Stake, 2005).

This study includes four points of data collection. First, interviews were held with two participants, students, who shared the common experience of enrolling in an online communications course while earning on-campus degrees at the same institution. Second, interviews were held with the instructor and two teaching assistants of the course. Third, data was collected from the course itself (LMS data that measured the amount of time all enrolled students spent participating in the online course). With both students' permission, their course interaction time was assessed and compared to the data of the rest of the enrolled students. Fourth, the syllabus was collected and reviewed (with the instructor's permission). The syllabus helped illustrate how the course was developed.

This study adds value by including Merriam's (2009) three special features required of case study research. It is particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic, all of which have not been pursued in the literature about this topic at this time (Merriam, 2009). To be particularistic, this study focuses on the current phenomenon of on-campus student enrollment in online courses.



This study describes that phenomenon from the context of a student who takes an active role in that phenomenon. To be heuristic, this study illuminates the readers' understanding of this phenomenon through the lens of a student. Quantitative data on student enrollment in online courses exists, but there is little information from the students themselves about their experiences.

### **Gaining Access and Participant Selection**

Two methods of participant sampling were used to identify student participants. The first method, criterion sampling, involves selecting cases that meet predetermined criteria that are important to the study (Creswell, 2007). In this case, the predetermined criteria were undergraduate students who have been enrolled full time each semester and who would meet the definition of traditional on-campus college students. Each student was not required to take an online course; they personally decided to take the online course (during intersession) reviewed in this case study. Each student represents a different academic plan, although they are from the same academic college. Administrators familiar with online courses at the institution where this case study took place reviewed available data and shared the name of an online course with high on-campus student enrollment. Student-specific data was pulled from the institutional Registrar's Office with this criterion in mind. The Registrar's Office shared a list of students enrolled in the course with the following details: age, high school graduation date, first semester college enrollment date (to ensure that the participant was a traditional student who took no time off after high school), degree plan, location of degree plan (on-campus or online), and their contact information (name and email).

The second method, purposeful sampling, allowed a selection of participants who felt engaged in the specific online course for this case. Purposeful sampling is used based on "the

assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). The student participants involved in this case study were sought based on their engagement level with the course. The engagement level for each student was determined through an email survey, which was distributed to students who were listed in the data provided by the Registrar’s Office.

Five students responded to the initial survey that they felt engaged. They were contacted via email and invited to participate with additional details about the study. Once students learned more about the time commitment, two of the five students declined to participate in the study. Three students agreed to continue; however, one of them was unable to participate due to an accident prior to our first meeting. Via email, the participants and I agreed upon times to meet. We met three times during the Spring 2018 semester. I provided each of them with a copy of the consent form and briefly reviewed the process for the study before the first interview began.

A brief analysis of data collected from the two student participants identified gaps in understanding. The students had taken the course weeks prior to our interviews; however, they were not clear on some of the details such as how the teaching assistants operated or if certain modules of the course were required or optional. After speaking with other researchers, I determined that more data would improve the research. I used the course catalog (open for viewing to the general public online) to obtain the name of the faculty member who taught the course and found her email on the department website. I emailed her an invitation to participate in the study and set up interviews. From the faculty member, I obtained the names of the teaching assistants for the semester in which the two student participants were enrolled. I emailed an invitation to participate to the teaching assistants and three responded; I interviewed the first two respondents.

## **Research Location**

The interviews and meetings with student participants were held in a conference room at a local coffee shop during the Spring 2018 semester. The same location was used for interviews with the teaching assistants during the Fall 2018 semester. The faculty member was interviewed in her office per her request. While secure enough to hold a private conversation, these spaces were chosen so that the participants felt safe and comfortable. It is important for the participants to be as relaxed as possible so that they are comfortable talking about their experiences (both positive and negative). I avoided any conflicts with my role as an administrator on campus and I did not use my office space for academic work or research. Students who participated in the study were not students with whom I work directly or who would have been affected by my administrative role on campus.

## **Participant Role**

Participants in this study had a role to play, too. Willing participation and cooperation were expected (Merriam, 2009), and if a participant was not willing or comfortable with the study, she had the option of no longer being included. Regarding case study research, the willingness of participants not only aids in the gathering of data, but it is a requirement so that researchers remain ethically just and do not violate the trust of participants by asking more than is expected (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). I wanted all participants in this study to be comfortable with the information they provided, and I hope that they enjoyed the experience of learning about themselves in a positive manner.

Participants were expected to be open about their experiences. It was my responsibility to build a rapport with each participant so that they knew that their information was confidential and used for nothing more than research. Each was expected to be available for meetings that

lasted up to one hour each. Two meetings were expected for the interview (a primary interview and follow-up interview as needed), and one meeting for member checking.

### **Membership Role**

It is vital in qualitative research to recognize the role of the researcher. The researcher is unable to adopt a completely neutral role in the field while directly interacting with participants in interviews (Flick, 2007). Given that the researcher can never be truly neutral or removed from interactions, it is important to understand what role he or she may play in the interaction with participants and how it may affect data collection. Adler and Adler (1987) present three membership roles that the researcher may assume when participating in the research: peripheral, active member, and complete. The first of the three membership roles, peripheral member, is a marginal role and the least involved with participants. While they may be friends with participants, their activities with participants are minimal, playing a more observational role. Active members, the second role, have a functional role in the research in addition to observing the environment. This identifies the researcher to participants and requires that the researcher build trust and gain acceptance with the participants; a researcher must understand his or her self-reflexivity and maintain his or her role as researcher rather than becoming too involved with participants or affecting change in the environment. Lastly is the role of complete member. This researcher is fully immersed in the setting and possibly already a member or participant in the case itself.

My role in this research is that of an active member. I placed myself directly in the educational setting with participants to interview them. I clearly explained my intentions as a researcher and maintained my distance and did not become involved in the lives or environment of the participants beyond that of researcher. I purposefully established a relationship of trust

and acceptance with the participants so that they felt comfortable talking with me. Although I do work on the same campus as these students and staff, my role did not intertwine with their lives before or during the research.

### **Data Collection**

I used interviews to collect and explore the experiences of the on-campus undergraduate students who have taken online courses, engaged with this communications course specifically, and continue to enroll in online courses. Three interviews were conducted with each student participant of approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length (the interviews came to a natural conclusion and all questions were answered). Predetermined questions were asked of each participant, with additional probes for each question to help guide the participant to an experience-rich response (Appendix A). The answers to my questions became repetitive by the third meeting. During the third interview, I encouraged the participant to reflect on themes that I had identified during our meetings, allowing for participant feedback and checking for accuracy of my notes, otherwise known as member checking. Interviews were held over the course of 10 months, yielding 239 pages of interview transcripts.

I asked the instructor and teaching assistants questions about the course, its structure, and their intentions during the course (Appendix B, C). In some ways, the questions were similar to the student participant questions, but with the aim of understanding their experiences as course facilitators. The interviews were focused on their role as course facilitators, but I soon learned that the teaching assistants had experience taking online courses as undergraduate students. Interestingly, their experiences echoed the themes of the two student participants I interviewed in this case. Lastly, the faculty member was asked to provide a copy of the syllabus as well as some student data from the LMS. This data revealed how long each student was logged into the

LMS, giving a point of reference for the time spent on the course. Names of students in the course were redacted with the exception of the two student participants who were interviewed for this case study. I reached out to the two student participants for permission to view their specific activity time in this course in order to compare it with other enrolled students; they agreed.

These various forms of data (interviews with students and teaching staff, the syllabus, and student activity data) were used in order to understand the case being studied from many angles and I utilized data triangulation to verify participant accounts and specific details (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Yin, 2014). A timeline of the study from identification of participants to write up of the study can be found in Appendix D.

### **Data Sources**

It is important to obtain data from various sources, to collect enough data to inform the study, and to organize data efficiently. The table below displays the data inventory for this study. Data were collected from each participant (from interview transcriptions and from notes taken during interviews and during data analysis); 373 pages of transcripts, documents, and other notes were collected over a 10-month period. This data was necessary for appropriate data triangulation, coding, and analysis.

Table 3.1

*Data Inventory*

Source of data	Number of pages	Total Pages
3 interviews per participant	5 participants 20 pages per one hour of transcription	239 pages
Syllabus	6 pages	6 pages
Activity Time	10 pages	10 pages
Word Frequency	6 pages of words longer than 5 letters used more than 8 times in transcripts per participant	30 pages
Analytic Memos	Comments are written on interview transcripts, interview questions, private journal	40 pages
Data collection notes	3 pages of coding notes per source	48 pages
Total pages		373 pages

**Primary Interview**

My first data source was a primary interview, a direct conversation between a participant and myself. The participant is a primary source of information. Interviews permit a researcher to explore a topic with participants, allowing new ideas to emerge with open-ended questions to guide, but not restrict, the conversation (Creswell, 2007). It is important for the interactions to be positive with respect to the participant, not judging their responses and not threatening in any way (Merriam, 2009). When researchers are unable to observe the behaviors of participants firsthand, interviews allow the next closest encounter with the participant's view of reality and truth (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014). The interviews give the researcher a deep understanding of

how participants see their environment and allow the researcher to gain a sense of the participants' attitudes and feelings about a situation (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Yin, 2014).

The first data collection was a semi-structured interview with the participant, which was recorded and later transcribed. The interview followed Yin's construct of a prolonged interview, guided by questions, but conversational in tone, not strictly structured, (2014) and probing questions were asked as needed to keep the conversation moving and to probe for specific details. Interviews did not seek out a positivist truth; rather, the interviews sought a mutual understanding of each participant's unique situation and feelings (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Fontana & Frey, 2005). Neutrality is not a goal and is not possible, but the experiences of myself and the participants add to our ability to understand the participants' engagement with online courses (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014).

### **Instrumentation**

Interview questions were chosen based on the research questions guiding this study, as well as on previous research in the field regarding engagement. Each question allowed for open-ended responses from the participants and encouraged the participants to talk at length about their motivations to take online courses and about their experiences with online courses as traditional on-campus students. I wrote probes to explore for each question based on the information I hoped to gather in the event that the participants did not state this information while answering each question. This interview style, with guiding follow-up statements, follows Merriam's (2009) suggestion for semi-structured interviews in which she suggests that researchers use predetermined questions and a list of issues to be explored (in this case I call them probes) in the event that the participants' answers do not include information pertinent to the study. Additional probing questions arose as I listened to each person speak and I asked



these questions spontaneously, as needed, to drive the conversation (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Frey, 1989). Stake (2005) observed that it is best to anticipate the need to change rather than to depend on a plan. Questions were asked in an unbiased manner, inviting the participants to share feelings of their own (Yin, 2014).

The interview guide for student participants can be found in Appendix A, with the questions listed below:

1. Tell me about the first time you decided to enroll in the online version of [the communications course] in as much detail as you can.

**Probes explored**

Reasons for enrolling in the online version of the course  
Prior experiences with online courses  
Decision-making process for enrolling online  
Fit of online course into program of study

2. Think about a time of the semester when you felt most engaged with your online course and tell me about it in as much detail as you can.

**Probes explored**

How the student felt engaged in her course  
What happened as a result of that engagement  
How invested the student was in an online course compared to an on-campus course  
Shared definition of engagement between researcher and participant

3. Walk me through your first week (in the online course).

**Probes explored**

Academic interaction with course peers  
Academic interaction with faculty member  
Informal interaction with course peers  
Informal interaction with faculty member  
Navigating the LMS  
Description of communication via LMS, email, phone, and social media  
Registration for the course  
Interactions with advisors and academic mentors

4. Tell me about a time when you experienced some challenges.

**Probes explored**

Academic interaction with course peers  
Academic interaction with faculty member  
Informal interaction with course peers  
Informal interaction with faculty member  
Navigating the LMS  
Interactions with advisors and academic mentors

5. Write out a timeline of your experiences in the online course from enrolling to getting your grade with critical milestone events on it. Tell me about the milestones on your timeline.

**Probes explored**

What made each event important?  
Academic interaction with course peers  
Academic interaction with faculty member  
Informal interaction with course peers  
Informal interaction with faculty member  
Interactions with advisors and academic mentors  
Sense of belonging  
Sense of isolation  
Support systems  
Academic and informal networks across institution (peers, study tables, tutoring, academic coaches)

6. Tell me what contributed to your successful completion of this course?

**Probes explored**

Relationships with people inside and outside of the course  
Support systems  
Challenges faced  
Methods student used to overcome challenges  
Motivation to engage with the course and members of the course

7. Are there examples of experiences from your background that motivated you to take and be successful in online courses?

**Probes explored**

Experiences with fully online courses  
Experience with an LMS  
Experience with online technology and social media  
Academic resources and history in the program  
Importance of this course in the student's academic program of study

8. Tell me about some support systems you relied on while taking this online course. Discuss how the support system helped you in as much detail as you can.

**Probes explored**

Supporting university resources

Peer networks

Extracurricular resources

Time spent in addition to required classroom activities and assignments

Shared definition of support systems

9. Think about the course content, the subject matter. Tell me what you knew about the course before enrolling and if you were interested in the subject?

**Probes explored**

Interest in the subject matter prior to start of the course

Relationship of subject matter to student's academic plan of study

History of taking courses with similar subject matter

Experience with indirect communication such as asynchronous video lectures

10. Tell me about your interactions with the online instructor.

**Probes explored**

Tools used to directly, independently, interact with instructor

Experiences communicating with instructor

Course resources used to communicate with students

11. Describe your interactions with other students in your course.

**Probes explored**

Tools used to directly, independently, interact among students

Experiences communicating with students

Course resources used to communicate with other students

12. Is there anything you want to share with me about your experiences of being an on-campus student in an online course that I have not yet asked?

A separate interview guide used for the faculty member can be found in Appendix B.

The faculty member has a different relationship to the course, and she is not the focus of the research; therefore, different questions were asked. The questions are listed below:

1. Tell me about the first time you decided to teach the online version of [the communications course].

**Probes explored**

Reasons for teaching the online version of the course

Prior experiences with online courses

Fit of the course into the department

2. Walk me through your process in designing the online version of [the communications course] in as much detail as you can.

**Probes explored**

Intended audience of [the communications course]

Purposeful engagement elements within [the communications course]

Tools used to facilitate [the communications course]

3. Tell me about a time you changed or updated something in your course to better meet student needs.

**Probes explored**

How the instructor measured student engagement

How the instructor communicated with students

What original elements of the course were used

What new elements were added to the course

4. Think about a time during the course when you felt students were most engaged with your online course and tell me about it in as much detail as you can.

**Probes explored**

How did the faculty member measure student engagement in her course

What happened as a result of that engagement

How invested were students as compared to an on-campus course

Shared definition of engagement between researcher and participant

5. Walk me through your first week (in the online course).

**Probes explored**

Academic interaction of students with course peers

Academic interaction of students with faculty member

Informal interaction of students with course peers

Informal interaction of students with faculty member

Description of communication via LMS, email, phone, and social media

Navigating the LMS

6. Tell me about a time when you experienced some challenges as the faculty member in this course.

**Probes explored**

Academic interaction of students with course peers

Academic interaction of students with faculty member

Informal interaction of students with course peers

Informal interaction of students with faculty member

Navigating the LMS

7. Think about the course content, the subject matter. Tell me what your perception was of student knowledge of the subject matter prior to their enrolling in the course?

**Probes explored**

Interest in the subject matter prior to start of the course  
Relationship of subject matter to students' academic plans of study  
Student history of taking courses with similar subject matter

8. Tell me what contributed to successful student completion of this course?

**Probes explored**

Relationships with people inside and outside of the course  
Support systems  
Challenges faced  
Methods students used to overcome challenges  
Differences in experience with online course and past on-campus courses

9. Tell me about your interactions with the students in the course.

**Probes explored**

Tools used to directly, independently, interact with students  
Experiences communicating with students  
Course resources used to communicate with students  
Differences in experience with online course and past on-campus courses

10. Is there anything you want to share with me about your experiences of instructing on-campus students in an online course that I have not yet asked?

Lastly, a third guide was written for the teaching assistants. Their relationship to the course, and specifically to the students, is different from that of the faculty member's. The questions follow and the complete interview guide is located in Appendix C:

1. Tell me about the first time you decided to assist in teaching the online version of [the communications course].

**Probes explored**

Reasons for assisting in teaching the online version of the course  
Prior experiences with online courses  
Fit of the course into the department

2. What did your role of teaching assistant consist of?

**Probes explored**

Managing communications with students  
Managing message boards  
Facilitating conversations between students

3. Walk me through your role in the design process for the online version of [the communications course] in as much detail as you can.

**Probes explored**

Intended audience for [the communications course]  
Purposeful engagement elements within [the communications course]  
Tools used to facilitate [the communications course]

4. Tell me about a time when you were involved with changing or updating something in the course to better meet student needs.

**Probes explored**

How the teaching assistant measured student engagement  
How the teaching assistant communicated with students  
What original elements of the course were used  
What new elements were added to the course

5. Think about a time during the course when you felt students were most engaged with the online course and tell me about it in as much detail as you can.

**Probes explored**

How did you measure student engagement in the course  
What happened as a result of that engagement  
How invested were students as compared to in an on-campus course  
Shared definition of engagement between researcher and participant

6. Walk me through your first week (in the online course).

**Probes explored**

Academic interaction of students with course peers  
Academic interaction of students with faculty member  
Informal interaction of students with course peers  
Informal interaction of students with faculty member  
Description of communication via LMS, email, phone, and social media  
Navigating the LMS

7. Tell me about a time when you experienced some challenges as a teaching assistant in this course?

**Probes explored**

Academic interaction of students with course peers

Academic interaction of students with faculty member  
Informal interaction of students with course peers  
Informal interaction of students with faculty member  
Navigating the LMS

8. Think about the course content, the subject matter. Tell me what your perception was of students' knowledge of the subject matter prior to their enrolling in the course?

**Probes explored**

Interest in the subject matter at the start of the course

9. Tell me what contributed to successful student completion of this course?

**Probes explored**

Relationships with people inside and outside of the course  
Support systems  
Challenges faced  
Methods students used to overcome challenges

10. Tell me about your interactions with the students in the course.

**Probes to explore**

Tools used to directly, independently, interact with teaching assistant  
Experiences communicating with instructor  
Course resources used to communicate with students

11. Is there anything you want to share with me about your experiences of instructing on-campus students in an online course that I have not yet asked?

## **Analytic Memos**

While collecting data, it is important for a researcher to collect his or her thoughts on paper and draft analytic memos as a method of synthesizing thoughts and ideas prior to writing (Charmaz, 2006). Writing analytic memos allows researchers to analyze data during the collection process in order to begin thinking about emergent codes, looking for patterns in the data, and developing thoughts (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Yin (2014) suggests that these notes are an important component of case study research, allowing for insights and reflections during interviews, observations, or document analysis to be organized for

access. I used analytic memos to refine my thoughts and followed Saldaña's (2013) advice to reflect on my coding processes, specifically on how emergent patterns, categories, subcategories, and themes in the data emerged and how each case may relate to one another as well as the theories and literature guiding my study. When I reviewed the data, I turned to these notes and was able to review what I had been thinking during the interviews.

### **Final Interview**

A final interview with each participant was held after all other data had been collected. This interview allowed me to ask any questions of the participants that came to mind while reading their interviews and reviewing their data. I discussed with participants any themes I had noted in my memos that stood out in the data analyses I had completed at that time. The final interviews were scheduled for one hour but varied in length from 20 (if there were few questions) to 60 minutes (if there were many questions I had for the participant).

### **Data Management**

My data management plan details where files are stored and backed up for security. I have created a data management plan so that all files are organized neatly for easy searching and secured so that no data is lost during this project. All data obtained during this process is kept in three places: in a home office, on a laptop, and in online storage in the event of a hardware failure. The interviews were recorded simultaneously on two machines: a laptop and an iPhone using audio recording software. If one machine had stopped recording during the middle of an interview, I had another device already recording, which would have allowed me to proceed without interruption. A MacBook Pro laptop was used with the audio/video recording software Zoom. The software captured audio (the camera was turned off) and saved it in an MP3 format so that I could play it back later for transcription. Although Zoom can record video, I did not use



this function for recording. Video recording does not serve a purpose for this research. At the same time, an Apple iPhone was used to capture an MP3 file of the interview. This was my backup device in case the laptop failed during the interview. Each audio file was moved to a folder on the MacBook Pro laptop, which is secured by password and backed up to a password-secured cloud storage system. Using Apple iTunes and Microsoft Word, the interviews were transcribed and saved to the same folder as the audio files; the transcripts were printed out and stored in my home office.

I wrote notes and analytic memos whenever convenient. These notes were written in a paper journal that is portable and was easily accessed during interviews. Some notes and codes were written in Microsoft Word format and stored in the cloud storage system. This made for easy formatting and tracking of attribute codes, which are discussed later, so that each participant's data was treated similarly.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began during the data collection process and continued after the interviews were completed. Initial analysis included techniques such as writing analytic memos, because it was important to record ideas and thoughts at the moment (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2006). I reviewed and analyzed the data from participants' first two interviews after transcription in order to identify themes and common elements between participants that indicated how students engaged in online courses. During the third interview, I reviewed initial themes with participants as a form of member checking.

Qualitative researchers use many different analysis methods based on the data in order to get a close understanding of the experiences of participants. Saldaña (2013) identifies two cycles of coding used to analyze transcripts. First cycle coding provides the qualitative researcher with

an opportunity to closely assess transcripts for meaning. The second cycle coding methods are used to organize the data coded through first cycle methods into themes, assembling data into categories “to develop a coherent metasynthesis” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 207). In the process of first cycle coding, I used three tools suggested by Saldaña: in vivo coding, value coding, and emotional coding. Axial coding was used for the second cycle method.

### **First Cycle Coding**

In vivo coding is a method that relies on the participants’ own voices, coding with words and phrases they have spoken or written (Saldaña, 2013). I used in vivo codes to encourage myself to dive deeper into the data, reading between the lines, and looking for what was most important to the participants. This style of coding is similar to using a filter to sort out each word, phrase, or sentence individually and free of connotation. Two processes were used for in vivo coding: software and a manual reading.

The software NVivo was used for a quick count of frequently used words in the transcripts. This software has two options. First, it looks at each word and how many times it occurs. Second, it looks at words, but combines those with common stems. For example, friend and friends. Many common words such as “the” and “and” were removed due to being insignificant in meaning or because they are used frequently not for meaning, but out of habit by the participant. Transcripts were analyzed individually, in groups (students or teaching assistants) and then all together. As a group, student participants’ use of the similar-stemmed words “challenge” (21 times), “difficult” (19 times), and “struggle” (12 times) appeared often enough to stand out in the list. The teaching assistants and faculty member used words that would be expected in a discussion about students: “students,” “interactions,” and “learning.”

Next came the manual reading for meaningful phrases spoken by participants. I read and re-read portions of the transcripts with pens and highlighters in hand. I highlighted any phrase that appeared to be significant and made notes on the right margin, giving each phrase a topic or using a word to describe the phrase's meaning in relation to my research questions. I paid attention to the specific words that NVivo highlighted as most frequent, to the tone of the participant's voice during the interview, and to words spoken with intense feeling (Figure 3.1).

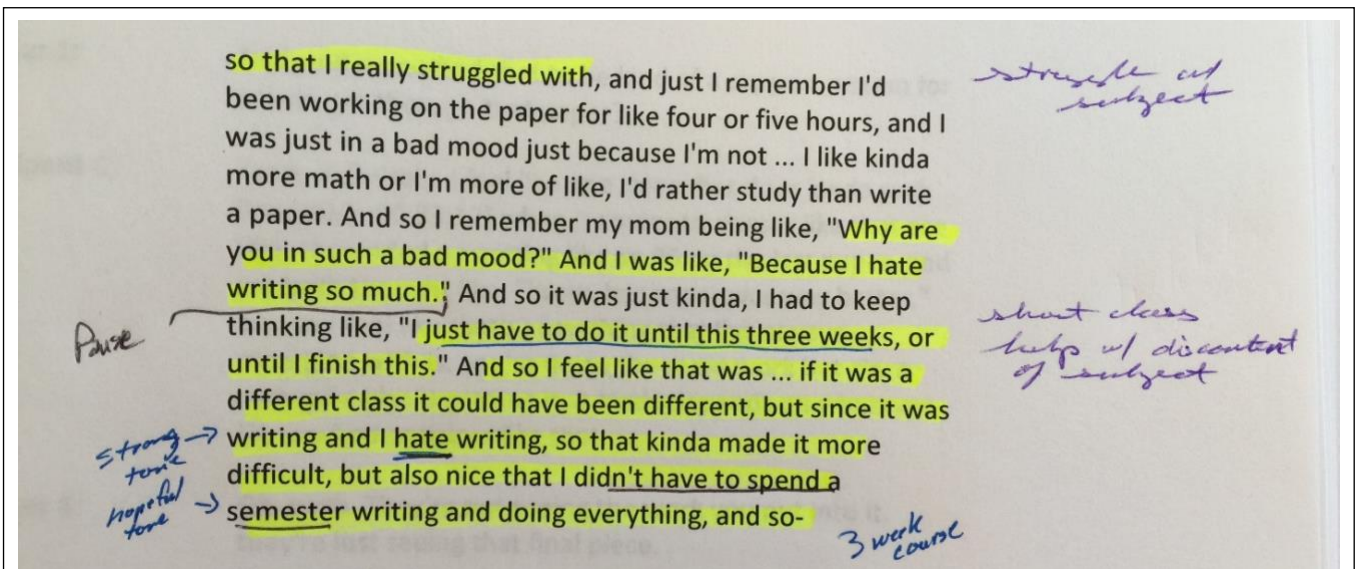


Figure 3.1 Example of First cycle Coding. Excerpt of interview transcript with highlighted text and notes from the researcher. Notes on the left represent audible and visual changes during the interview. Notes on the right represent the thoughts of the researcher.

A review of the notes taken during the interviews, the audio files, and the transcripts helped bring attention to a few other terms in which participants were invested. This is when value and emotional coding are used to capture participant emotions and values that may not come from select phrases by themselves.

According to Saldaña (2013, p. 110), “Values coding is the application of codes onto qualitative data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview.” I noted in my interview notes as well as on the transcripts when a

participant spoke about her values. I used these values as a lens for each participant when assessing other statements and quotes throughout the interview so that I always read their passages with their worldview in perspective.

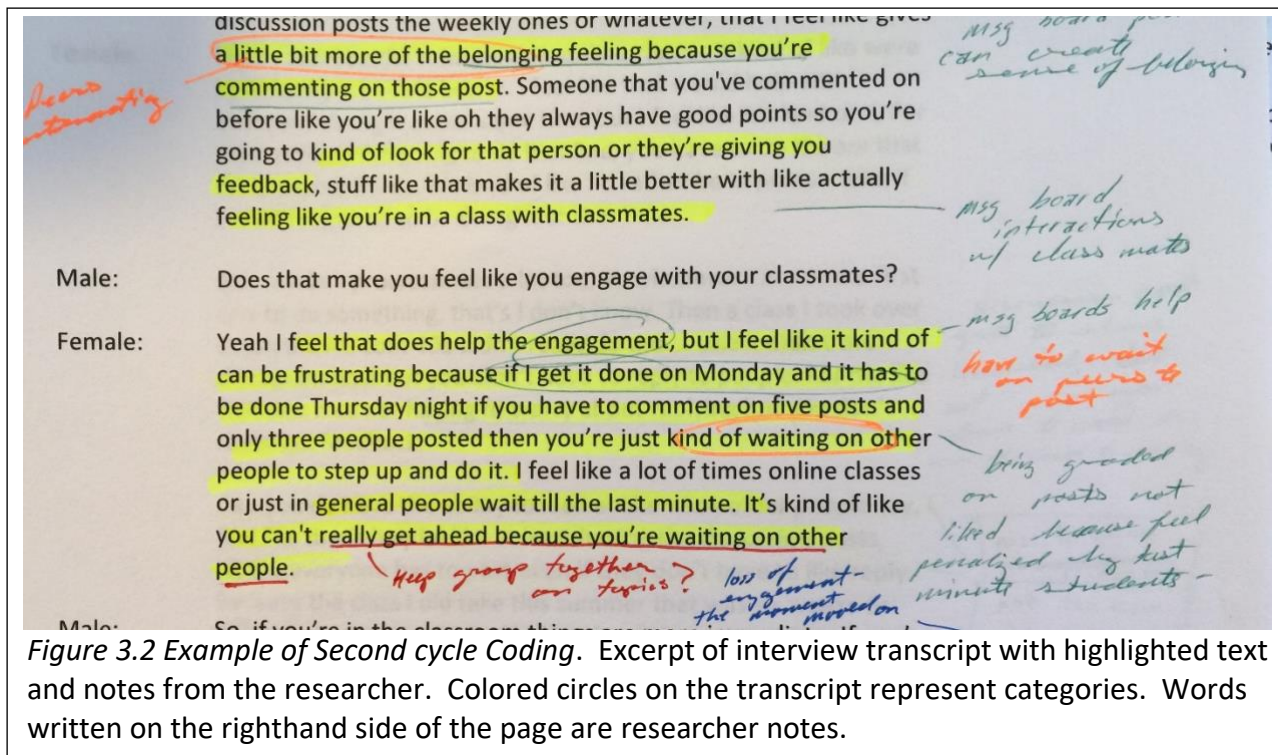
Emotional coding captures a participant's emotions not only through transcripts, but in the participant's "vocal nuances" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 106) and non-verbal engagement during the interview. When talking about video, student participants became more animated, shaking their heads side to side. One student used the term "hate" twice as she spoke about the subject area of the course we were discussing. This is a term that carries strong meaning and her emphasis and tone were strong. When talking about "friends" or on-campus peers, the student participants became animated through vocal intonations or head bobbing.

### **Second Cycle Coding**

Second cycle coding is the process of fitting each of the elements of first cycle coding into logical categories "to develop a coherent metasynthesis of the data corpus" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 207). I utilized two methods to sort the quotes and data elements identified through first cycle coding into more relevant and rich themes: focused and axial coding.

Focused coding is used to identify the most salient categories of data (Saldaña, 2013). Saldaña (2013, p. 213) describes this process as being done without "distracted attention at this time to their properties and dimensions." I read and reread transcripts at least five times. After my first reading, I considered what topics or themes came up most often in the transcript and decided upon the codes that would be most telling of the student participants' experiences. I wrote these themes in my journal and color-coded them (Figure 3.2). Red signified "organization." Black signified the theme "textbook." Green was used to signify "communication," with a key variation on communication, "faculty member communication," in

pink. Purple signified “subject,” as in the course subject of communications. Orange was used for “peer relationships” (referring to both online and on-campus peers).



My next readings were done with these colors in hand. I circled, underlined, and made notes in these colors on the transcript to label the themes within the text. In addition, I used a yellow highlighter for any words that seemed to carry significance. I found that certain words were more significant in later readings than in the first reading due to a more complete understanding of the transcripts. I used an orange highlighter to signify portions of text that answered my first research question specifically, the previous experiences student participants had with online courses. A green highlighter was used to signify portions of text that described student motivation to continue taking online courses. The categories were not the final themes and sub-themes. These were simply the first stage I used to code phrases with similar meanings.

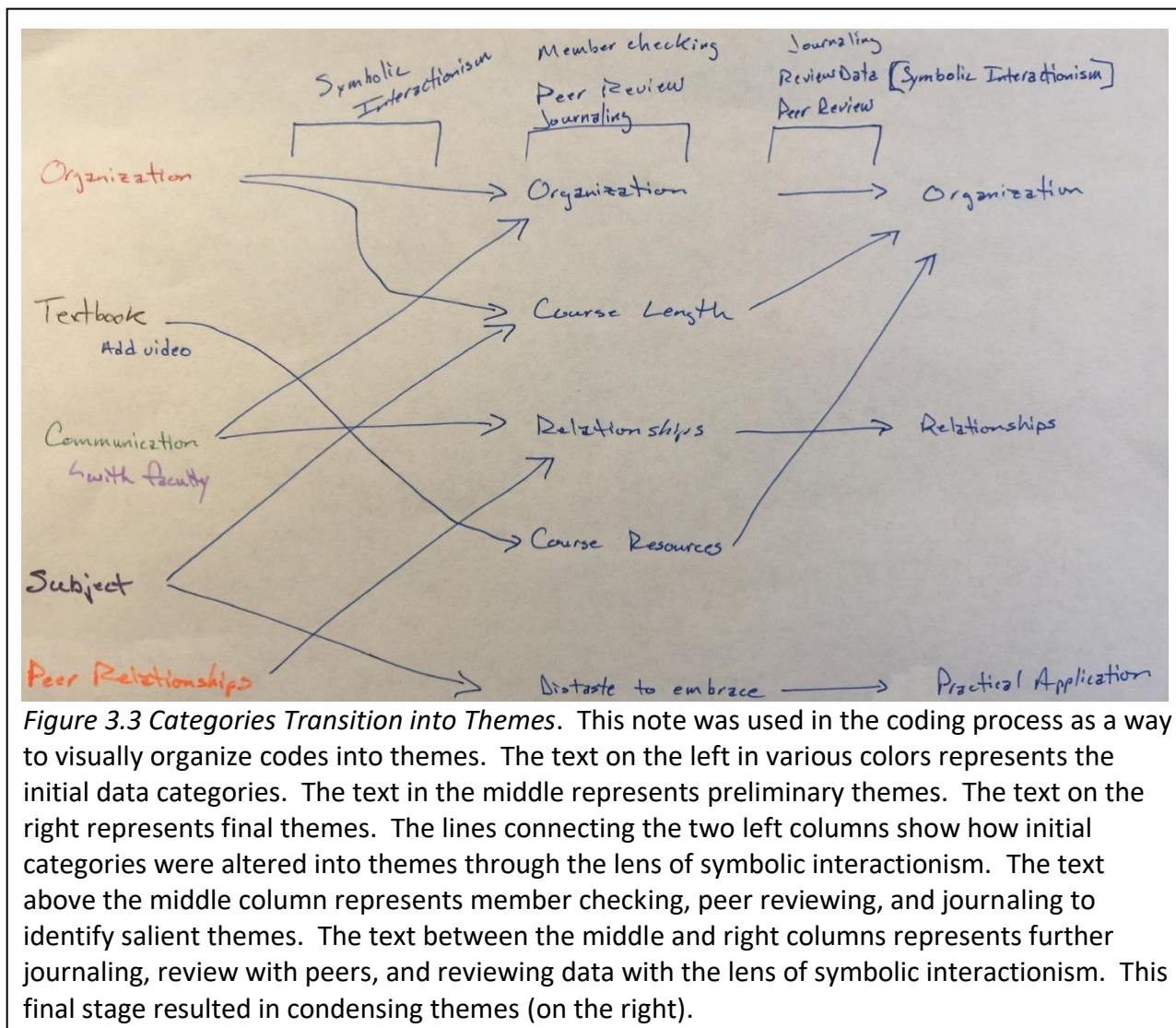
The next stage of second cycle coding, axial coding, extends the work of focused coding by processing data and categories into more strategic themes (Saldaña, 2013). Saldaña (2013) describes this process as reorganizing data, removing redundant codes, and looking for those that are most dominant in the transcript. Through this process, large categories are identified and some of the less dominant categories become sub-categories. I took each phrase, quote, or idea and wrote it into a document under each category heading. I worked with the categories, reviewing transcripts multiple times, until each category became unique. I edited the final categories three more times before I concluded that these categories reflected the strong salient themes in the interviews and honestly mirrored the feelings, attitudes and experiences of participants.

I used the research questions as a primary template for my themes. I divided the codes into three areas based on the three questions. The first and last research questions were easy to categorize quickly. These questions focused on the previous experiences of student participants with online courses and their motivation to continue taking online courses in the future. Student participants tended to speak about previous experiences when we began interviews. When they brought up past experiences, it was easy to notate in my notes and in transcripts. Student participants spoke less about their motivations to take future courses, but those responses were clearly identifiable. Their responses to the second research question, discussing what aspects of an online course engaged them, were much more difficult to sort into themes. Their comments did fall into some common categories, which I reviewed and to which I applied my theoretical framework as a guide in identifying predominant themes.

I reviewed the color-coded categories (organization, textbook, communication, subject matter, relationships) and found there was a great amount of overlap. I applied elements of

Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism to help interpret participant statements in order to better understand their comments. As participants' thoughts repeated and overlapped with one another, emphasizing their understanding of the elements/objects they experienced and interacted with in the course, it became clear that these thoughts, relating within each person's individual story as well as with one another, were greater than their individual statements – they were themes with meaning. In addition, my own experience with online courses came into play, as Blumer indicated it would, because our own views and experiences change and adapt as we learn of how others' relationships with the elements mentioned fit into the overall course structure and are salient elements in many courses.

While “course organization” was easy to isolate as a theme, other categories morphed into new themes that were much more defined than the original. Figure 3.3, below, demonstrates how the original categories evolved into final themes.



### Peer Debriefing and Member Checking

All of the codes and data were discussed with other researchers. In addition, I sought out faculty members to help check data and codes (my committee members). Saldaña (2013) stated that discussing codes with a peer can help validate findings and helps researchers ensure an accurate portrayal of the data. I shared the transcript and codes with the participants of the study so that they, too, could help validate the findings and check that I was accurately portraying their situations. I did not want to portray participants inaccurately in my study.



## **Data Representation**

With the data collection completed, I wove themes together into a bricolage of meaning. A bricolage is what Saldaña (2013) described as a collage of ideas and themes from cases; themes may not have much in common with each other except for the fact that the themes represent important aspects of a case. In this case, the themes are the most salient ideas presented by participants as viewed through the lens of symbolic interactionism. Examples of transcripts and codes were used to show how salient themes emerged and to provide a rationale for why each theme is important. The bricolage created from the participants' most significant statements demonstrates the most commonly held beliefs of participants. These meaningful experiences brought together across participants demonstrated commonalities that can help readers understand student engagement in online courses. The data, shared in the form of narratives and themes, are represented in Chapter Four.

## **Reciprocity and Research Ethics**

It was important that participants be able to gain knowledge from participating in this experience. If participants felt that they were getting something from this research, they were more likely to engage in the research process. Student participants gave up free time and their personal information to me and I was ready to reciprocate by providing them with resources that would assist them in their college careers. Reciprocity could have included connecting students to services on campus such as tutoring and career services. If they had any questions about their online courses (transferring courses in from another institution or questions about online services), I was ready to connect them with a staff member who could help. Once participants finished meeting me for interviews, I gave them a debriefing statement with contact information for the study (as specified by my IRB office) and resources at the university. This connection to

the study implies that I am a contact for each student participant until their graduation in the event that they have questions about online courses. For their volunteered time, I gave each participant a \$30 gift card.

Like the students, the teaching assistants and faculty member gave their time in order to meet with me. In much the same way that I am supporting the student participants, I plan to support the teaching assistants if they have questions about online teaching or courses in which they are enrolled. The faculty member has expressed interest in the results of this study once this dissertation is available to read. All three received a debriefing statement and a \$30 gift card.

There are no known risks for participants at this time. I took measures to protect each of the participants' privacy and to protect them from any harm. If participants felt uncomfortable at any time, they were free to withdraw from the process and my study upon their request. An example of an ethical concern or risk would be if the interviews and conversations with a participant had brought up troubling memories. In some cases, students, teaching assistants, or the faculty member may have had a troubling interaction with a peer or student online. Should any such issues have arisen, I was prepared to help the participant schedule an appointment with a counselor or other appropriate staff member at their institution. Throughout the study, the participants were given the chance to discontinue at any time and they only continued with the research if they felt comfortable.

By ensuring comfort and incentive to take part in the study, I kept participants engaged with the interviews. This helped me build a rapport with the participants. The data obtained included the participants' motivations to take or teach online courses and I encouraged honest answers, valuing each person's story.

## **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Any work of research begins with an understanding of quality (what makes good research). Whether the definition of quality is set by a committee, profession, or by one's own internal dialog, there is a rubric used by the researcher that keeps the work focused. How one defines quality in their own work is often based on guidelines of a larger body; however, qualitative research lacks such a standard. Gordon & Patterson (2013) pointed out the lack of a universal guideline for the profession of qualitative researchers and look to Tracy (2010) as a point of reference. I followed suit and used Tracy (2010) as a reference to define how my work models quality research through eight "Big Tent" markers of quality: (1) research worthiness, (2) rigor, (3) sincerity, (4) credibility, (5) resonance with a reader, (6) contributions to a field, (7) ethics, and (8) internal coherence.

The eight criteria began a discussion among researchers to think about what they are looking for in quality research. Gordon and Patterson (2013) pointed out that until recently, many publications judged work with vague guidelines that were often at the whim of a reviewer's own agenda. The popularity of Tracy's (2010) work showed the interest in a common dialogue about what makes good qualitative research now that researchers do not need to defend qualitative research's place in academia. Researchers can focus on what makes good work rather than rationalizing why their work is valid in the first place. These eight criteria are broad because the qualitative arena is large and guidelines need to allow for the diverse works that make qualitative research valuable (Tracy, 2010). My research relates to Tracy's markers of quality as detailed below.

First, a topic must be worthy of research in that it should be relevant and of interest to a larger community than only the researcher (Tracy, 2010). My topic, on-campus student

engagement in online courses, is timely. As more students move online each year, understanding how to engage on-campus students in online courses by getting the data directly from student participants is critical in helping faculty members offer engaging courses focused on helping students succeed.

Second, research must be rigorous, include a rich set of data, and be guided by theory (Tracy, 2010). Substantial amounts of data must have been collected between interviews, memos, and other collection methods, and the data must have been analyzed with scrutiny, adhering to methodological protocol trusted by the profession (Tracy, 2010). My research was done with well-documented rigor and organized with well-accepted theories.

Third, the research must be sincere. Tracy (2010, p. 841) states that this goal can “be achieved through self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, transparency, and data auditing.” I have been open about my position in this research and what my goals are. My position on this topic is transparent, allowing the reader to understand how my ideas and beliefs may have influenced the research. It is impossible to completely remove the “self” of the researcher from his or her work and we must be open about what part of the “self” is contained within the work.

Fourth, the research must be credible. Representations of the data must be trusted by the reader as true and plausible with thick descriptions of the data and findings so that the reader can follow and trust the researcher’s line of thought (Tracy, 2010). My study includes rich accounts from each participant and is backed by data from interviews and other resources; thus, it is triangulated. I have asked for the participants’ assistance in reviewing the findings to ensure that they are accurate and that my portrayal of their experiences is sincere.

Fifth, the research must have resonance with the reader (Tracy, 2010). There must be an effect on the reader that moves one to action, changes the reader’s line of thinking, or engages

the reader to emotionally connect through aesthetic merit (Tracy, 2010). One of my goals was to open my written work with a discussion of how many on-campus traditional students (nearly 6 million a year) are taking online courses. Another goal was to uncover ways in which students taking online courses are engaged in those courses that have not been covered by previous research. I wished to transfer the lives and emotions of the participants in one way or another to the reader so that they can understand the motivations of students and relate it to their own experiences in higher education.

Sixth, this work contains significant contributions. Tracy states that work must add to the knowledge in a field, improve current practices, or bring clarity and understanding in ways that other research has not (2010). At this time, no qualitative studies have been conducted on this topic, creating a gap in the literature that this research addresses. Previous quantitative research admits to being limited and the questions that were asked limited student responses. My study adds to the field and fills gaps in the research that my colleagues have previously noted.

Seventh, a work must be ethical. Methods and procedures must be in place so that the research follows ethical guidelines set forth by institutional review boards and the profession and so that all participants are protected from any known harm (Tracy, 2010). I have been respectful of each participant and I have taken steps to ensure that I am sharing their ideas, words, and motivations truthfully. I follow the guidelines set by my profession, which include using data only obtained from participants with their permission. As discussed above, steps have been taken to ensure that all work with participants is ethical and done with care.

Lastly, a work must have meaningful coherence and stand on its own. Tracy (2010, p. 848) lists that studies must “achieve their stated purpose; accomplish what they espouse to be about; use methods and representation practices that partner well with espoused theories and

paradigms; and attentively interconnect literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings.” I have worked to use a logical structure in my written work so that others may easily read and ascertain what is most important about this research. I had an editor and peers read my work to ensure that others will comprehend the work as I intend. I call upon such researchers as Merriam (2009) and follow best practices for a case study.

### **Subjectivity**

It is important that I state my relationship to this topic. My history has shaped the way I approached my subject, methods, and analysis. The subject of this research relates to my prior professional role of working in online education at a university, and because I am passionate about this subject, I am motivated to do this research to contribute high-quality data to the literature. As Peshkin (1982, 1988) stated, subjectivity should always be disclosed, as it does affect a researcher’s entire process. The researcher always carries with him or her personal and professional experiences, assumptions, and values, and one must acknowledge the influence these may have on their research (Bhattacharya, 2007). In many ways, it is important to recognize my history with this subject, as it has provided me with the insight to study student engagement in online courses in depth. I know the field of online education quite well and I have a professional relationship with higher education both on campuses and with online content. Rather than ignore my subjectivity, I make a full disclosure as to avoid misconstruing my role in this research.

The institution at which I work is a traditional midwestern land grant university that has been providing a college education for over 150 years. This university serves primarily traditional 18- to 22-year-old undergraduate students. Students take most of their courses in traditional classrooms and laboratories. However, an increasing number of students have taken

some coursework online through either our institution or another one during their on-campus academic programs. My role is as a service provider working with on-campus and distance students with disabilities. As a student myself, I have taken courses on campus as well as online for a degree that is primarily earned with on-campus courses. The online courses I took were required for my program of study.

I see higher education as a continuum serving all students. At this time, there is much data showing that on-campus students are taking online courses (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015a; Seaman et al., 2017), but administrators and faculty members lack data showing how to effectively engage these students. Understanding how to engage on-campus students in online courses helps faculty members improve their pedagogical methods so that they may become effective instructors to all their online students.

### **Summary**

It was my aim to meet with participants – on-campus college students, teaching assistants, and a faculty member – to understand their perceptions of what elements in an online course engaged students. In the next chapter, I have molded the data I gathered into a pattern of meaning, reconstructing the thoughts and words of participants so that professionals with an interest in engaging on-campus students in online courses can learn some of the elements that promote engagement.

Data has come from interviews with students, the faculty member, and the teaching assistants, as well as from the LMS and syllabus. I analyzed the data using first cycle and second cycle coding in order to identify the two to three most salient themes. From this, I have constructed a bricolage of the data and written prose describing the themes and shared how I came to these conclusions so that readers may understand my logic (see Chapter Four).

As more traditional on-campus students take online courses, faculty need to learn what techniques and components of an online course engage students and allow them to meet the student learning outcomes. Thus far, with no real research on the topic available, this research, providing interviews with students, a faculty member, and teaching assistants, as well as sharing the themes that arose from the interviews, provides much needed information to online faculty members who teach on-campus students.



## **Chapter 4 - Findings**

The premise of this study is that on-campus students who self-identified as being engaged in an online course can provide important insights that help faculty improve courses to better engage students in the future. Through interviews, students, teaching assistants, and a faculty member shared rich experiences in online learning. I explored these experiences through a theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, including the ways in which they created meaning from various interactions with objects, people, and ideas. I learned how their personal identities affected the way they view the world around them. Social constructionism tells us that shared experiences and shared meanings give us a basis to construct what we know about the world around us. The shared concepts and viewpoints become powerful themes from the collected data and these themes, having affected the participants similarly, can provide others with valuable knowledge.

This study was a single case study methodology, bounded by an online course with a high on-campus student enrollment. The units within this case are two students, two teaching assistants, and a faculty member. This chapter represents the findings of this case study in two sections: a sampling of the data and an analysis of the data. First, I provide the data in the format of a descriptive and analytical narrative of each of the participants. The narrative is written in the first person, using direct quotations and creative prose to best represent each participant's point of view. It provides rich descriptions of their personal viewpoints. These narratives are analytical in that they are divided and condensed into specific views on engagement, history with online learning, and experiences with this course. Analysis of the data found these three areas to be most significant in response to the research questions. Second is an analysis of the data woven into themes that can be extracted and applied to our understanding of on-campus student

engagement in online courses. The themes represented in the data are the elements of course organization, strategic relationships, and applicability of the subject to student goals.

### **Course Description**

The course that binds this case is a high enrollment, completely online, three-week winter intersession course; in addition to winter intersession, it is taught during the 16-week semester online and in person by the same instructor. During the semester when participants in my case engaged with the course, there were 132 students enrolled in the intersession course, a vast majority of them on-campus students. The subject of the course is written professional communication. The course is set up specifically for students who are not in a communication major. As this is an entry-level course, the students taking it have not taken prior courses with the faculty member who taught the course, and since they are not majors in her department, it is highly unlikely that they will ever have her as a faculty member for a future course. Since the course is taught completely online during winter break (between the fall and spring semesters), students are often living with their parents out of town and the faculty member and teaching assistants are not in their on-campus offices. Most students will never meet the faculty member in person.

The course was not always available in this modality. The same course has been taught on campus for many years. Approximately five years prior to my interviews, the faculty member modified the course to be offered in a hybrid format. She believed that many resources and lectures could be posted online, and that students could do much of their work independently while benefitting from a campus component to workshop papers and ask questions. At the same time, demand for the course was high and there were not enough sections on campus to keep up. Within a year, the faculty member proposed creating a fully online course and received a grant to

do so. The online course began with distance students who used it to meet an elective course requirement, but soon enrollment was opened to on-campus students. College administrators were concerned about whether the course would fill after the first semester's low enrollment; however, on-campus student demand was high, and the course was offered regularly not only during traditional semesters, but during the winter intersession.

### **Participant Profiles**

In this section, I have used the lens of symbolic interactionism to construct narrative profiles of each participant. These profiles are condensed representations of the interviews using direct quotations from the participants and the researcher's prose to accurately capture the nature of each participant. Researchers use symbolic interactionism to seek understanding of how individuals create meaning, how they construct their identity, and how they define their interactions with other individuals. I chose to write each narrative profile in the first person in order to represent each person's experiences using nearly verbatim excerpts from the interviews. This point of view allowed me to stay close to the data and provide the reader with each participant's worldview, background, experiences in online learning, academic goals, and impression of their engagement with the course that binds this case. The profiles below are both descriptive and analytical, reflecting the information shared by participants in a purposeful and meaningful way.

#### **Amber**

Amber was a 19-year-old sophomore by her own report, but a junior based on the number of credits she had accrued by taking concurrent courses for college credit while in high school. Prior to taking the online communications intersession course, she had taken a few courses online through a local community college. After completing the intersession communications

course, she had already started taking another online course at that same community college.

Amber is from a small town and she knew everyone who attended her high school. Even at the large university she attends, she continues to be a social person, actively participating in her sorority as well as in other organizations. Like many students, she holds down a part-time job.

**Amber's perception of engagement<sup>1</sup>.** I think engagement within a course is how much you're dedicating your time in actually working, practicing things. If I relate it back to a math course, it's how long I spent working those math problems, trying to understand it, and how long I was sitting in a class and getting something out of it.

I feel like a lot of students don't take a step back and look at what they learned. I mean, you hear so many students say, "Oh, why did I take that? Why do I have to take this?" And granted, I'm that way with some classes, too, like a sociology class I took. Skipped that a few times – and I'm not a class skipper – because I didn't find it interesting. I didn't like it. I thought, "I don't like this. It's not with my major. I don't get why I have to take this." But then you have to take a step back and think, "Oh, I had to take this because I'm gonna have to deal with people every day of my life and I need to learn a little bit about how people work even if it's not my major."

In my major classes, the lectures aren't just teaching off a slide, or standing there and lecturing and you take notes, except for one professor. He's awful. He teaches my policy class. I love policy, but he just stands up there and lectures off notes he has written down. He writes important things up on the blackboard behind him and I can barely read his handwriting. I take extensive notes, way more notes than I would have had to take. I'm a big note taker and I like to

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<sup>1</sup> Written in Amber's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

write things down. I'm still a pen and paper type of person. You learn so much better. And then I have teachers who teach off the slides, and I'll print the slides off and add my own notes to them too, just because I need that to be able to learn. I can't just look at it. I mean, I can, but I learn so much better doing it by pen and paper. When you sit in a lecture, you may get a lot of things from the professor that aren't relevant, or you stop paying attention because you can only be engaged so long with something.

That's the best thing about my major – most of my professors write out their notes on the overhead projector so I can write them down at the same time. They explain why it's important while I take notes. I think that hits home with how you've got to teach that subject material. I get is so much better that way. My statistics teacher teaches that way too. She puts out her notes, which I like, but then she'll add to it. I think that gives you a good combination of both worlds. It helps keep me engaged, but I don't have to write everything down. When it comes to learning new things, I like to hear it, I like to see it, and I like to add to it.

I have a professor who does a great job teaching and trying to keep it exciting. He has a no phone policy, so everyone's phone is put away. He'll call you out, which is great. I like that. Then I make myself pay attention more. Also, I like the course material. I think that's a big thing for me. Whether or not I'll pay attention has to do with whether I like the course material and if it is somewhat challenging for me. I guess take my statistics class now, for example. I love math. I have always loved math. Math is my thing. But I sit in statistics and I'm bored. I'm still getting an "A" currently. It's just a class where it seems so easy and I probably should be more engaged, but at some point, it is almost too bland and too easy for me. I like a challenging course.

One class I was not engaged with was a class my mom made me take in anthropology. I hated it. It was my first semester freshman year and I sat in the back. I was almost late every day. My note taking has gotten a lot better since then, but as a freshman, I didn't think I needed to take a lot of notes. I got through high school without taking a lot of notes. Anyway, I struggled getting into the mindset for that class. I am math-oriented and left-brained. I don't have the right-brain creativity aspect to me. There are two levels to hard classes, I think. I would rather have hard content in something I am passionate about and be able to do well in it because I'm interested than to have easy content but not be able to focus or pay attention because, quite honestly, I don't care about the subject matter.

When I don't care about the subject matter or I don't engage, it helps to have friends in the course. My friends and I had a GroupMe set up for a bunch of us and we would do projects and everything together. It's probably not how the university wants us to do things, but when it's just for a required course and it doesn't matter for your major, you can just work together to get things done. So, I guess when you're not engaged, you can engage with your friends and still get the "A" you need in the class.

Another way I make sure I'm successful in class, and I guess engage in the class, is that I plan everything out. I review the syllabus for each class and mark down all the due dates and assignments in my planner. Having a planner is critical to my life. I color-code things, then I do everything that is due in order and work ahead when I can. It can get rough when a lot of things are due at the same time. That's why it's so important to plan. My plan helps me be motivated to do well and I always shoot to get an "A."

**Amber's history with online courses<sup>2</sup>.** I've taken a couple of courses online through a local community college. The classes I took were cheaper, easier, and I knew I was going to do well and they weren't going to affect my academic standing. Academically, I don't like to fail, so I don't fail. I've been a straight "A" student all my life. I don't know how to fail. In my opinion, you're not doing as much work in an online class as you would be in a classroom setting. The classes I've taken online before I wouldn't count as school and I wouldn't count as a job because they weren't a ton of work, but you just had to make sure you got it done so you could get the credits. They're pretty loosely run. I would never take something that my major depended on through them. For my online classes from the community college, I didn't study for quizzes and I didn't do anything extra.

The downfall of taking online classes from somewhere else is you lose out on the interaction between other kids and other peers. In the online courses I've taken elsewhere, I don't know people in them. It is harder to engage when you don't know anyone and don't have the incentive to engage with anyone. In fact, in any online course my engagement level cuts itself at least in half, if not more. I think that's just taking it online. You don't get the same contact with the instructor that you would get in person, either. That's not the way I would like to go to school at all. I'm a big social person and I love to talk to people.

With any online class, you're going to have that disengagement. If you're just taking a few online courses here and there, it doesn't hurt you. It helps you, I think. You can get more done, and when you're an on-campus student, you're still going to get the best of both worlds. I would like to take classes online that I have less interest in and just want to knock out. Any

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<sup>2</sup> Written in Amber's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

classes I need for my major are going to be taught in person. It's just really hard to engage people through screen time. I think that human nature is you have to talk, have to talk to people, you have to make yourself go out there and communicate with someone to really get that interaction. And through a screen is not the way to do it. Along that line, I hate long videos. I think, "Okay, this is getting boring. I don't care anymore."

**Amber's experience with this online course<sup>3</sup>.** I enrolled in this online course because I was having scheduling conflicts with what I was going to be able to take this semester with my major classes. It was one of our required electives and it was supposed to be easy. I got a lot out of this class, and I know a lot of people don't. I guess I sometimes look at academics differently. The more you are able to engage in the course, the more you're going to get out of it and the easier it's going to be for you to get something out of it. This class interested me because writing is not one of my strong suits, so I was improving something that I knew I wasn't going to be as good at, and I was also writing about something I cared about.

The first week of class for me began a few days before the class even started. The instructor opened up the class early and my best friend and I sat down and knocked out a lot of things before they were due. There was an assignment due almost every day. The professor was incredibly good at planning and giving us everything we needed to know beforehand, which helped a lot. I think what the instructor gives you up front, and their organization, reflects how good they are as a teacher and the experience they have.

She opened the course early, which helped, and then the projects weren't as hard or didn't require as much effort from your side doing them, and then you got to the bigger papers

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<sup>3</sup> Written in Amber's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.



and they were all due bam, bam, bam, and you're like, "Oh, no. I'm behind." I felt most engaged during that last week of the class. I feel like if I had taken this course in the regular semester, I would have gotten bored. It seemed a little rough at the time, but it's three weeks of your life. Getting the brunt of the coursework done the first week was pretty influential in my success, I would say.

Our first assignment was mainly to put you in contact with your TA. It was like doing a first day in class introduction type of thing, which was nice. The TA got to know you and then they said a little bit back about themselves. I'm not the kind of person who really asks for a lot of help, but if I needed something or wanted some clarification, the TA or professor always gave it to me. The TA also left helpful comments on the discussion board, like, "You forgot a...." I needed a lot of writing critique and help. I'm a math and science nerd. I'm not a writer. It's not something I like to do. I was able to email the TA a few times for help, and that's the only interaction I had with them directly.

I felt like this class was better than sitting in a lecture. We used the book, the information in the LMS, a big block of videos that were resources, and links. I felt like the instructor had the right amount of information and the resources we needed to do it right. If this course had required watching videos, I would have skipped it. You don't have time for video watching in a three-week course. It's got to be quick and snappy. There was an online discussion board, but we didn't have to talk to other online students. We just responded to the main topic. Also, I loved the \$65 textbook. It has a lot of insight for writing papers and how to write papers, different types of papers. I thought the book was a book that everyone should just have regardless because it teaches you so many things.

The class was really helpful. I don't like to write, but I think there's a lot of practical application and skills that you do need to extract from the course to do what I want to do in life. You gotta know how to write. I'm all about the practical application of things. You gotta get something out of it.

There were a lot of kids I knew in the class. My best friend and I would sit down and do assignments together. She came over to my house almost every week and we would always set aside time to do a few of these assignments. We had another friend in the western part of the state who we would conference call in. We bounced a lot of ideas off each other and we took the quizzes together, which I don't know if we were supposed to, but we did it anyway. Your support system is really the people you know personally in the class. I texted and called my friends whenever I needed help. Your friends help with the accountability of being in class.

### **Cassie**

Cassie was a 20-year-old self-reported junior who had enough completed credits to be a senior. During our discussion, I learned that she had taken many summer courses to speed up her time to graduation; she had taken numerous courses online through her home institution and through other institutions in the area. She takes online courses because they fit in around other courses or when she is home with her parents over the summer. She took this communications course because it was an option for one of her electives, and of her options, this course was taught through her academic college. Like Amber, she is involved on campus in her sorority and other groups.

**Cassie's perception of engagement<sup>4</sup>.** I feel like I learn more when I am required to go to class, even for the classes that are attendance-based and you have to be there, because that makes it easier for me. I think, "Okay, if I don't go there, then I'm gonna be penalized," and so I go. Some classes make it easier to be engaged. You have to print out the notes in advance and then you have to fill in the blanks, and so you have to be engaged. In one of my classes right now, he has PowerPoint notes, but he just talks and you kind of write down what he says, or he does examples, and so that's something because I'm not sitting there waiting for him to fill in the blank or anything. I'm writing it down on my own. I feel like I'm learning more.

For another class my freshman year, 90% of the things on the test came from the notes. I started out writing everything down, then later recorded each lecture. Then to study for the tests, I would go back through my notes or recordings. I guess engagement kind of depends on the class, but also on the tests. I have another class that is project-based, and it makes it more difficult to pay attention during the lecture because, I'm like, "Okay, I'm not gonna have a test on this." They're just talking, and you just try and take it in, but you think, "Well, I don't want to take notes because I'm not gonna need it for the test."

For a class I'm in right now, the professor asks a lot of questions and then waits for people to answer. For me, being engaged in that class is knowing what she's talking about and being able to answer the questions or engage in the group discussion.

I don't just go to class to learn, either. Sometimes I go to office hours and ask the teacher questions. I feel like teachers want to help you out. I'm not like, "Oh, I hope they give me points for coming to office hours." I go because I'm actually trying to learn something and I feel

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<sup>4</sup> Written in Cassie's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

going to see them in person makes it easier for them to get to know me so when they give me answers to my questions, they know how I'm actually gonna learn. Creating a relationship with the teacher makes it easier to go to class and listen because I can understand them better and can understand the material better.

I feel like sometimes I engage better in on-campus classes than in online ones because in on-campus classes, you're in the moment and not waiting for someone to respond. There's no delay. In online classes, I might get my work done right away and be waiting to comment on other people's posts on the discussion board, but they won't post until almost the end, or I'm waiting on them to comment on my posts. Their comments can be really good, but if you wait too long, they aren't helpful. You also can't really get ahead when you're waiting on other people. I do feel like discussion posts can be more engaging than just going to class in person, though. In my lecture classes, I just listen and don't really ask questions or talk to people. Whenever I'm forced to discuss and post things online, though, I'm actually thinking about it more. I feel like that's good involvement, engagement.

Sometimes I have friends in a class or who have taken a class I'm in before, and we talk about the class. We proofread each other's papers or talk about what questions we missed on a test. That makes me feel like I'm not alone. We don't really collaborate, but it helps me make more sense of what I don't understand or need help with. TAs can help that way, too. I've had TAs in a lot of my classes, and since they know the material, you can ask them questions and they can help you understand things.

Engagement is also about doing work for the course. I feel like starting ahead on my homework is something that's been beneficial because I can claim that time and so it's not like I'm doing it the day that it's due an hour before it's due and having questions. For some classes,

knowing that I have to start homework ahead of time is good because I know I'm going to have questions and it's easier to get as much done as I can and then go ask the professor about it.

I can work ahead because I write everything out in my planner and color-code everything, so I know when it's due. Some days I think, "I'm gonna spend a good portion of this day just getting a lot of the little assignments done," which is more just to have them done so I don't have to worry about them later. When I get things done like this, I feel like I'm really engaged.

**Cassie's history with online courses<sup>5</sup>.** I've taken a few online courses here and at other schools during previous semesters and over the summer. With the courses I've taken, it's kind of like I feel like I have the potential to learn less because it's more on your own, and you have to be disciplined to pull up the PowerPoint lectures or however the class is set up, rather than just going to class. All the classes I've taken online have been required, like required electives. I took that one class last summer because I heard that it was easier because it was at a different school. I can't take any classes this summer, though, because I'm down to just needing courses for my major.

I took a class last fall at a different school and it was like you had a test every single Friday, but only for a certain amount of time, so that I found difficult because it's like, if I have a really busy Friday or had been up late studying for a test or just had a busy week, I didn't like having just that short time span to do it. If it had been open for a week, I could have planned out when I was gonna study and when I was gonna take the test. On the other side, one of the classes I took had the homework open at the same time each week, and due at the same time each

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<sup>5</sup> Written in Cassie's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

week, so you would know when you had access to it and how long you had to do it. I think that consistency was really nice. It's good when you have enough time to plan and do the work.

A class I took last summer had discussion posts, but then you had to comment on other discussion posts, and there were times towards the end of the summer where I would find myself posting and then waiting for other people. It was like, "I got my part done, but I still have to go back and do this other part," but you're still waiting. And I took a class online after my freshman year and there were a bunch of discussion posts and stuff and there were a few of them where I was the only one that ended up posting and I thought, "Well, what am I supposed to do? Is it gonna affect my grade because no one else is doing their posts?" Sometimes, though, the discussion posts can be good. I feel like they give you a little bit more of the belonging feeling because you're commenting on posts. Sometimes you find a person you've commented on before because you know they always have good points, so you look for that person, or they give you feedback. Stuff like that makes it a little better with the feeling that you're in a class with classmates. Being forced to discuss and post things, you're actually thinking about it more.

Last semester, I got my first "B" since eighth grade in an online class. In that class, I found it real easy not to watch the PowerPoints or to just put them off and do the assignments. I didn't really learn as much because I wasn't watching the PowerPoints or listening to the audio with them. When professors post online lectures, they're almost in slow motion. You're just waiting for them to say what's next or just keep talking. I learned from that course that if I'm gonna take a lecture-based online course, I have to set aside that certain amount of time when I'm gonna sit down and watch the lectures as if I was at a class on campus. I can't just think, "Well, I'll do that tomorrow. I don't have to do it now."

I did have one professor record lectures where he was just talking to a camera, not lecturing in a class. I feel it was kind of awkward for him, too. He made jokes throughout it; I was more engaged because of that. He would say, “Here’s where I would hope people would raise their hand, but no one will.” I found it useful to watch because I could speed up the video and not sit there waiting for him to get to the point. When they’re not in front of a classroom, I think they’re more conscious of what they’re saying and so it’s just a little bit slower. On the other side, if they film the video of them lecturing during class, they can get off topic, then I get distracted, so it makes it harder for me to stay focused.

One thing that’s hard about online classes is that you don’t always know people in them. For one class, I looked at the roster for the on-campus students and emailed them. I feel like that’s weird, so I don’t really tell a lot of people that. I try to find people who have taken the class I’m about to take online before, to hear more about it. That’s helpful, too.

Another nice thing about online classes is that they are shorter. I like to take an eight-week class at the beginning of the fall semester online because you aren’t working as hard in your other classes at the beginning of the semester. It’s easier for me, mentally, emotionally, and academically, to put in a lot of extra effort the first eight weeks to get that class done because I’m motivated. Then your schedule frees up when the class is over. I’ve taken a few 16-week classes, but they take a lot more managing with when things are due. I like to take the eight-week classes better.

**Cassie’s experience with this online course<sup>6</sup>.** I took this class online during intersession so I’d have fewer credits during the spring semester. I’m enrolled in 15 hours this semester, but

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<sup>6</sup> Written in Cassie’s voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

I'm really only in 12 since I took that class over intersession. I enjoyed taking this class online because it wasn't sitting and listening to lectures. They gave you your assignments, what you needed to do, and you could do it ahead of time. It was like, "This is when this is due," but they opened everything at once, and so I enjoyed that because I could do it at my own pace and I knew when things were due. I like having things done before the due date. They also had all the stuff in the gradebook, so I could see what grade I needed to get on things to get an "A." For me, I prefer to get an "A."

The LMS page for my intersession class was really well-organized, which made it a lot easier. They utilized the modules and you could minimize them so you were looking at exactly what you needed to. They had some online videos at the beginning, only five minutes long, about the library or other topics. I won't watch a 20-minute video, but five minutes, I can watch that. The videos were nice because it showed that the professor had worked with the librarians and the librarians understood the project so you could ask them questions, too. The book is great, too. I feel like I used the book a lot more than I would for a usual class since it was simplified and specific. The short chapters made it easy for me to look at.

This class had three big projects that were built off each other. You had to take what you learned or what you did from the first part and put it into the second part. It wasn't just getting this little part done. You had to do it all to keep going. The class taught a lot of résumé or professional skills. Having the online textbook and having someone give feedback I found to be really beneficial. Assignments had you read three pages, not 30 pages, and they were all examples of cover letters with parts explained. I had to read it because there were quizzes, but it makes it a lot easier when it's short.



I feel like there wasn't a lot of interaction with other people in the class on the discussion board. The class was split up with the TAs, so you did get feedback from your TA, which I enjoyed having because I knew my TA was putting work into her 10 or 20 students and not just a teacher trying to get through it all. I felt like when she did give feedback, it was genuine. Like I knew what she was talking about and she would reference things I did. I didn't really communicate with the instructor, just the TA. I never felt like I was alone, or I couldn't ask for help. I emailed the TA a couple of times. I figure she has such a small amount of people that she'll probably respond faster than a teacher who has, like, 80. The instructor did post an introduction post, so we knew who she was, and that was nice, because I've had classes in the past where they don't say anything and so you're just kind of like, "Okay, I have no idea who you are."

I took the class with two of the people I'm good friends with, so we talked about it. The three big projects were on a topic you had chosen, so it wasn't like we could really collaborate on what we were writing about, but we would send each other our stuff and proofread it and things like that, and so that helped me because I'm not much of a writer. Being with my two friends, I was able to send them my rough drafts and that was really beneficial. When I wrote the résumé, I couldn't get it to line up perfectly, so I reached out to my friends on that, too.

That's another thing. I dread writing papers and stuff, but I liked writing the résumé and the cover letter because I feel like it was beneficial. The TA gave feedback on the cover letter that was like going to the Career Center. There was a real job I wanted to apply for, and I wrote my cover letter for class and turned it in for a grade, but I also used the cover letter to apply for the job – it was a win-win. I really cared about the subject matter of the class once I saw how I could use it. The class was also really helpful for my position with my sorority. I have to get a

lot of information out, but I learned in class how to put that stuff at the beginning of my messages. I was like, “If they’re only going to read one sentence of the email, let’s make it the most important.” It was a good class.

### **Vivian**

Vivian is the faculty member who oversees the online course. As stated earlier, she was instrumental in transitioning the course into an online format from solely on campus through a hybrid phase to 100% asynchronously online. She had taught online prior to this course, but only graduate-level courses. This is the first course she designed for undergraduate students.

While interviewing Vivian, it was clear that she had vast experience in teaching online, a passion for helping students, and she cared deeply about her field. She felt comfortable teaching online and had a charismatic personality; she is clearly a faculty member who cares about engaging students. Students who never met her in person had great respect for her. They saw her as a professional and knowledgeable faculty member.

**Vivian’s perception of engagement<sup>7</sup>.** My research is on social media engagement. In social media, engagement is a like, a share. I feel like I transfer those concepts, knowingly or unknowingly, to the teaching world. I think when students are actively engaged, we can tell. They’re reading the rubric. They’re reading the book. They’re doing the things that we’re asking them to do. Some of it is just that kind of low-level piece. But then, I think particularly in the discussions, engagement is more of “how deep are you thinking about these topics,” not just “are you answering.” You can tell when a student really has had a moment when they’ve thought and reflected and can share more than just a “this assessment was good” statement.

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<sup>7</sup> Written in Vivian’s voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

For engagement, I look to see if students are reflecting. If we identify an error or problem area with our feedback on the first assignment, have they started to correct that on the second assignment? In other words, are you learning and taking the feedback that we've given you to improve the next time within a new context?

The students who are successful in the course are the ones who have kind of a gold personality and pay attention to details. Because as much as we try to offer resources for them in an online environment – you know we have some short videos, we have the book, we have rubrics – for students who aren't detail-orientated, or who aren't familiar with the online LMS, they can't find what they need. The ones who are really successful are finding the answers they need in our resources. In addition, we have students who are over-confident and just assume they can upload something they've already done without improving on it and it doesn't meet the rubric. Then there are the ones on the other end of the spectrum who genuinely are struggling and haven't done this before and maybe don't have that much experience. So, I guess you could say engagement in the course is another form of engagement – pay attention to the details and find what you need to be successful. Also, I really encourage their relationship with their TA. In the beginning, I'll answer questions they email to me, but as they get deeper into the course, I push them back to their TA because that's who the relationship is with. That's who they should be engaging with about the course.

**Vivian's history with online courses<sup>8</sup>.** I've primarily taught online courses for our department's master's program. It's a fully online degree, in addition to being on campus. We

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<sup>8</sup> Written in Vivian's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

don't have many on-campus graduate students who need to take our courses – maybe three or four – so we offer some classes online only, like the theory class I teach.

**Vivian's experience with this online course<sup>9</sup>.** Several years ago, I applied for a grant to make this class a hybrid, then right after that, I applied for another grant to move it fully online. I had a colleague who taught the class in person in the summer intersession, so that's how I ended up teaching it in the winter intersession. I didn't want to step on his toes or anything. We originally restricted the course to just distance students and had trouble filling it, so we opened up the intersession course to on-campus students, too, and have more demand than we have capacity on a regular basis. The online class lets us avoid in-person time conflicts students might have during the regular semester.

When I first started teaching this class online, I did a lot of the same things in it that I was doing in my online graduate-level courses, like having students blog in WordPress. It was too much for them and their writing was atrocious. Every post needed serious editing. I made them interact with each other, and it turns out undergrads don't want to interact with each other, so that piece just didn't quite work out for them. Early on, I tried the group thing, too, but that didn't work out so well, either. I make a lot of changes to the class each year based on what worked and what didn't. For example, now instead of having online discussions with each other, they have discussions with their TAs. We have targeted questions for each discussion and for intersession, we have eight total discussions. They have a discussion due every other day and an assignment due the days they don't have a discussion due.

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<sup>9</sup> Written in Vivian's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

Because it's a three-week class, it's intense. I send an email before the class starts, usually right after Thanksgiving, saying this class isn't a joke. You have to have internet access the entire time. You will have to submit things every day. I want them to make an educated decision up front about whether this class is gonna work for them or not. I open the class early, right after Christmas, so students can get started. Some want to start even earlier, so sometimes I let them.

I push student communications to the TAs, but I do all the trouble shooting, and with 100 students, there's always something that's wrong. I feel like my ideal load for TAs is 16-18 students each, although sometimes we're as high as 20, and that lets them work for about two hours a day depending on what we're doing. I meet with the TAs before we do the class, and I try to meet with them after the class is over. I ask the TAs along the way if you notice things that are wrong or aren't working, let me know and we can make adjustments. We make a lot of adjustments, from the quizzes to having students use LinkedIn for an assignment instead of Twitter. The grading rubrics have improved over time, too, as we have clarified things that confused students.

The first assignment in the class is for them to make sure they can submit assignments. It's called the "student information sheet" and they answer eight to ten questions. It's only worth 20 points, but it serves a lot of purposes. It lets the TA learn about them and what they want out of the class and it makes sure they can submit to the LMS in an appropriate format that the TA can read. It also lets them know where they can look for their feedback and introduces them to the grading rubric. Their TA responds back with a little about herself.

If there are people who haven't logged in the first day, we check on that. The student information sheet is usually due the first day, and I let them know that we won't accept late

work. If they don't submit the student information sheet, it's a sure sign they haven't been reading all the emails and aren't prepared and should maybe drop the class, so we watch for those things.

The majority enrolled in the intersession class are really on-campus students. It's a convenient time for them to get something out of the way that maybe they don't love during this short period of time. I would say the majority of these students are at home, at like home home, not campus home. Although they're not together, and quizzes are supposed to be taken independently, there could still be a group of them taking the quizzes together. Also, students aren't really interested in this class because it's not their major. They probably chose whatever hard science major they did to get away from writing, and then we tell them, "No, you have to write all the time."

Sometimes students struggle in the class because they are overly confident. They upload a résumé and cover letter and we grade it by the rubric and then they say they already took it to the Career Center and had it reviewed. That's great. If you didn't read the rubric, you may lose points whether the Career Center said it was great or not because you need to meet all the markers on the rubric.

When we set up the course, we not only put resources in the file section, we also link to it from right within the assignment. We have some short videos – maybe 10 minutes – that students can watch as resources but they're not a requirement. They're about grammar or asking a librarian for help or how to identify scholarly sources, how to pick a topic, how to build a research question. Really, we try to make sure everything is available and easy to find. We need students to be able to find answers to their own questions in the class, and for the most part, they can. If they can't, we email them where to find things. We used to have an expensive textbook

with its own website and log in, but it didn't relate to the students' majors and they struggled with the separate login. We've since created our own textbook that we use, and that works a lot better. It's also cheaper for the students. We update it as needed, too. Overall, we try to make the resources, the assignments, and the class relevant to the students and to their futures.

### **Jennifer**

Jennifer was one of the teaching assistants for the communications course that binds this case. She is getting her master's degree in the same department. She started working for Vivian as an undergraduate research student at the same institution being studied. Now, as a graduate student, she has much experience with online learning behind her. As an undergraduate student, Jennifer took a number of courses online. Each was an elective or fulfilled a non-major requirement. She has taken some online courses more recently as a graduate student. While Jennifer mentioned her online course history in passing and gave a few examples, her discussion of them during our interview was brief. She focused fully on the interview questions I asked of her, which did not include her own history with online courses.

**Jennifer's perception of engagement<sup>10</sup>.** Student engagement in a course is a million-dollar question. I think it's a matter of frequency. How often do you check in on them? How do you help them recognize that they're there for a purpose and that this course is meaningful to them and how do you help them see the value in what they're doing? I think that is the way to get them engaged and caring. It's also helpful to let the students know that, hey, we're trying to help you. This is going to benefit you. It may not be benefiting you right now, but in a year when you're looking for a job, what you learn here will help you. Why waste your time doing

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<sup>10</sup> Written in Jennifer's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

something that's not important? If we can make students see it's important, it matters, I think they have a better attitude about it, they produce better work. It benefits them ultimately, and I think it makes us feel better. That's one of the things that I love about this course is actually seeing good come out of people.

As a TA, my goal is to really strive to have a personal relationship with students in the course. If they had a question, they could email me directly and I was more accessible than the professor was. They could message me through the LMS, or text or contact me via Facebook messenger. I served as a help point to students. I find that if I see them asking more questions of me, or actually looking at the comments that I've made on assignments, I can see that they care about it. I've offered to do in person or zoom meetings in the past with students, and out of 28, two took me up on it. However, I do see they are engaged and caring when they take time to review my comments on their assignments to figure out why I have commented in a certain way, even if it's just because of their grade and not the subject matter. Another way I feel that students are engaging is if they're emailing later in the evening to say, "Hey, I'm working on this." You can tell that it's not primetime for doing work. No one wants to be doing schoolwork at 8 p.m. on a Friday night. It's a feeling like, "Okay, well, this person put effort into this."

Sometimes people don't engage in the class because they view it as just "required." I know they have a few options to take, but out of the options they have, this one is a better option for most people. Again, they just don't know why they're taking it, it's just a class they gotta make it through. It's always nice to see people who seem genuine in their introductions and care about assignments. Students need to be organized and on top of deadlines. We stress following rules, like the rubric, in their assignments. So as long as students have a growth mindset, try hard, and reach out when they need to, they'll be engaged enough and we can help them.



**Jennifer's history with online courses<sup>11</sup>.** As an undergraduate student, I took a few online courses, mostly biology, chemistry, and college algebra – classes that would be big lecture classes on campus. The classes weren't my interest, obviously, so that made the topics more difficult. These classes weren't degree-related, necessarily.

I have taken other online classes in my graduate degree and some of the ways of engaging with others in those classes is we would research a topic and create an infographic for it and were able to see others' infographics and were able to comment on them. That was cool.

**Jennifer's experience with this online course<sup>12</sup>.** I've been a TA for this class four times – twice during intersession, once online in the regular semester, and once on campus for the regular semester. The students who took this course during intersession were all outside our department. It's kind of a required elective. I don't know if they were distance students or on-campus students, but I hope they were mostly distance students. I'd like the on-campus students to take the course from us in person. As communications people, we really try, and I think, "You should take this in person because we can give you so much more out of it," because online is somewhat difficult. With that said, I do think that a lot of on-campus students take it online.

Before they take our course, I think that students think anybody can "communicate." My personal opinion is that communication is discounted as a discipline. People think it's just easy and comes naturally when really there are so many things that go into these things that you think you're great at, and then maybe, you're not as great as you think. So, they go into it thinking it's an easy grade because I can communicate. I think overall their general idea is that I don't need

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<sup>11</sup> Written in Jennifer's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

<sup>12</sup> Written in Jennifer's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

this class. They don't see the value in our class up front, and people aren't communicating the value well to them, either. One of the first assignments is a job application packet with a cover letter and résumé. A lot of times, they'll already have a lot of those things prepared, and they think, well, I've handed this to people, so they turn it in, but for our class, the format may not be right or there are glaring things on it and we let them know. I wish we could help the outside people, the advisors who talk to students, change the way they frame talking about this class because students have the perception it's easy, and that's a negative perception and not accurate.

I was in charge of 18-20 students in my learning community. We really strove to make it a personal relationship between the students and the TAs in this class, so students could email me if they had a question and I could be more accessible to them than the professor. We communicated a lot through email as well as messages through the LMS or commenting on assignments. We also had the discussion board. You could see sometimes on the discussion board that students knew each other. One might say, "I'm taking this class online over Christmas break," and another would say, "Oh, me too." That's always a good resource to have someone who's with you.

During the first part of the course, I focused on getting to know the students and their interests, because I think that is a big part of the direction their résumé was going to take. Knowing their interests, too, I might be able to make a suggestion for the focus of some of their other big projects.

One challenge I faced with this class was feedback. Online, there's only so much you can do, and only so many comments you can make. I try to make some general comments and then if I keep seeing the same issue come up in assignments, I'll make that comment. But I don't think the students get the full feedback and benefit they would if we were sitting across from

each other talking about it. There is a fine line you walk of giving too much feedback and they don't really care, or you don't give enough and then when they receive their grade for the assignment or the class, they're not okay with it. In person, they can explain better what they meant, and I can explain better what I'm thinking and that I'm not trying to give them a terrible grade – that's not my goal. You can read their body language in person, too.

Another barrier we had was asking questions. Sometimes people may have a little question, but since it requires a whole email, they're like, "I'm not going to ask that," where if you were in class walking around, they would ask that. I think it's definitely a barrier to asking a question if you have to email it.

## **Grace**

Grace was a teaching assistant for the course that binds this case and was getting her masters in the same communications department. She had been a teaching assistant for a year prior to helping with the intersession course; however, she had only been a teaching assistant in other on-campus courses until this online intersession course. After this intersession course, Grace was assisting with the same communications course taught on-campus in a full semester format. Unlike Jennifer, Grace does not have as much prior online education experience from a student perspective. Grace, too, focused fully on the interview questions and only mentioned her own experience with online courses in passing.

**Grace's perception of engagement<sup>13</sup>.** I think engagement for me feels like two-way communication. The students should be engaged in asking questions and participating and doing what they can, but also, I should be engaged and answering questions and giving them fun work

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<sup>13</sup> Written in Grace's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

to do. I should also be helping them be better and providing feedback that will help them. It's kind of a communication action type thing. Students can be super engaged and spend hours and hours on homework but not read the instructions. So, they're engaged, they're doing things, but they're not doing the right things. So, they can be engaged but still fail the course.

Engaged students turn in work and ask me questions. There are some students who will send me messages and emails and say, "I think I've got this... can you look it over?" or, "I just turned something in, did I do it right? Did I get it?" And to me, that symbolizes engagement. They're worried about their grade and they are trying to participate. Turning in an assignment right before it's due and never reaching out is a sign that they are not engaged.

I enjoy teaching on campus in person because I feel like it's easier to connect with people and to get them to engage, even the ones who don't want to engage with us. It's easier to get the engagement from them when I have them face-to-face and I'm saying, "Hey, you're not going to get hired if you put this like this." Online, I can say those things, but I'm just a screen at that point so people can choose to listen to the all-knowing computer screen, or they can say, "Hey, I don't even know this person. What does she know about writing a résumé?"

That's why I try hard to show that I'm invested in the class and it's not just an afterthought for me. I feel like it's important for me as a TA to make sure that the students know that I am there for them. I want to help them, I know what they feel like, I know what they're going through, I've been there in undergrad and I am still a student, too. That's the nice part about being a TA – I can say, "Hey, I understand. I'm a student, too." It's challenging, though, when you have a student who is not participating and is not doing the work. It's hard to give those zeroes. You can email them, but if they choose not to respond, you don't know what's

going on. Some students tell us in their introduction that “I’m just here because this is a requirement. I have to take it.” They’re not engaged.

I’ve had students in the past who didn’t engage with me directly, but who turned in really good work. A lot of those students were the ones who followed my comments. The ones who did really well and clearly learned from their mistakes and learned from what we were doing, I could obviously see that they were at least engaged with the subject, if not with me. Also, the course is really well-organized, extremely transparent and clear, and we don’t use video. I think it helps students be more engaged to know exactly what they have to do and when. Each assignment builds on the one before it, so it benefits them in some way and there’s no busy work. It’s important for them to know that there’s a reason for the way things are set up. Illustrating the value of the course helps students engage in it.

**Grace’s history with online courses<sup>14</sup>.** In undergrad, I took one online course. My school did not offer a lot, and so that one was a good experience. When I got here, I did some online courses for my graduate schoolwork. Some of the online grad-level courses I’ve taken were just busy work, and that is annoying. You can tell when it’s just busy work.

I’m currently taking a statistics class online, which is a great class, but motivating myself to watch the lectures is just not easy. Once I get into it, it’s fine, but when I open that window, then I’m like, “Oh, but I need to check my email, I need to check Facebook...” It’s easy to be distracted when you don’t want to watch the videos.

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<sup>14</sup> Written in Grace’s voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

**Grace's experience with this online course<sup>15</sup>.** I have been a TA for other classes, but this intersession was my first time with this one. This communications course is actually a course for non-majors. The students are in our college, but not in our department. I feel like it's a really valuable course for these students, but I might be slightly biased. Most positions, any job really, will have some communications piece to it, and so this class is really good professional development.

As a TA, I'm given a specific block of students and they are told that I'm their TA so they will contact me if they have questions or issues. Mostly, I'm there to grade or answer questions or help with any issues that might arise, like if something weird happens during the course and they have to drop out of school or a weird hospitalization or something strange happens, then I'm also the contact for that and I forward it on to the professor.

A lot of emailing happens. Many of my communications to students are through the grading rubrics and things on the LMS. I can make a general comment about an entire assignment or I can send an inbox email message through the LMS or I can send a real message. I can specifically say, "Okay, guys, you need to add commas," like I do face-to-face, but I can put my comments out there in messages. However, you can only put so many words in front of people. Standing in front of a class, I can say, "Oh guys, I remember now, I need to tell you this," but if I'm sending 500 messages a day to my online class, nobody wants to be bombarded by emails.

For this class, we had a discussion board and they had to read something and think about it or there was a small video they had to watch and they had to do a little reflection. We don't do

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<sup>15</sup> Written in Grace's voice using a composite of information shared from interviews.

much video, just short ones on YouTube. The discussion board isn't interactive, either. It's more to get people used to doing online stuff. I don't know if the students in the class are on-campus students taking it while they're home over break or distance students. I would not know the difference. Most students know how to do what they need to in the LMS, but we always get some who have used Blackboard or another LMS and they don't know how to upload.

Early on, the professor sends her big scary email that says, "Hey, this is going to be a lot of work," and she does that to make sure that the students who signed up for no reason aren't wasting their time or our time. It's a lot easier if everybody really wants to be in the class, and usually that does weed out a few people who don't actually want to be in the class or didn't realize what they were taking.

In the beginning of the class, students send us a picture of themselves and their résumé so we have a little bit more of a personal connection. It gives us a good look into their background and their interests, and it does help looking at later assignments that they turn in. After that introduction, we launch right into writing assignments and professional development pieces like cover letters, résumés, talking about that kind of stuff. They don't do group projects and there aren't many opportunities for them to get to know their classmates online. It's more of an individual course.

Before helping with this course, I thought that students would know more about how to write a simple résumé and cover letter than they did. Well, I say simple, but it's not really simple. I was a little surprised, and continue to be, actually, at some of the interpretations of things that we get. I definitely thought students were going to come in with more of an idea of what their industry wanted, and potentially what the industry they were wanting to work for, what they look for, like what types of professional development things, types of résumés, etc. I

don't know how many in the online class had worked on a résumé before because you can't see the look of sheer terror on their faces when you assign them to make a résumé.

The class is really well laid out, maybe better than our in-person regular semester class is. It's such a short class, that's important. They can see what assignments they're going to do and that's transparent. They know what we expect of them and we have clear rubrics for grading. Overall, it was easy for the students to go through. I think it helps that it's not video-related, too. They can get on the class, see what they're doing, look at the instructions, and say, "all right, I have to type a paper," then type the paper and be done with it.

### **Analysis of Results**

Each of the participants shared their experiences honestly. Amber, Cassie, Jennifer and Grace shared their experiences of taking online courses as on-campus students. Their feelings were similar; they believed that learning is best in person, in a physical space on campus, with peers and a faculty member. Although this study is focused on the experiences of undergraduate students in a specific course, it was interesting to hear that the teaching assistants had similar experiences with online education themselves. The difference is that the teaching assistants had learned to value online education as a tool to reach students and provided rich perspectives as educators in this case. Jennifer and Grace felt that teaching online was better than students not getting the information at all. They had picked up some of the skills and traits from their faculty leader, Vivian. The goal of this research was to collect data from undergraduate students regarding the elements of an online course that engaged them. The additional participants helped me place their experiences in context and better understand their interactions within the course. In the end, each participant was a valuable contributor in helping me understand this course and the elements that engaged student participants.



As I interviewed students, teaching assistants, and the faculty member about the online written communications course that bound this case and what each of them perceived as engaging, I heard many commonalities from different perspectives. Because the primary goal of my research was to hear about engagement in online courses from the student participants' perspectives, I focused on their words first in identifying relevant themes, then looked for where the teaching assistant participants' and faculty member participant's words added richness and meaning.

The following salient themes became evident during the interviews: course organization is vital to student success in online courses; strategic relationships add value to online courses; and course content must be presented as relevant to win over students. Some themes are more prominent than others, but each is meaningful. These themes are in no specific order, except that they begin with pedagogical elements and conclude with the final theme capturing how students were affected overall by positive engagement with the course's subject, written communication.

### **Course Organization is Vital to Student Success in Online Courses**

The student participants discussed course organization as key to promoting their engagement in the course; it was a salient theme throughout all conversations. Neither student participant would have been as engaged with the course had it not had clear and concise course organization. Amber explicitly stated, "having a plan and the ability to look at the schedule ahead of time to work it into your personal schedule was vital to success in the course." Both student participants spoke highly of the value of getting a full picture of what was expected before day one, and both appreciated that everything they needed for the course could be found in the LMS. One student participant felt the organizational structure in the LMS allowed her to easily find her place and click on resources she needed. Both student participants felt that the

clear organization was intentional. Upon speaking with the teaching assistants and faculty member, it became clear that the organization was not only intentional, it had been tweaked and updated each year to improve the student experience.

**Course organization must be transparent.** Although the term “transparent” came from one of the teaching assistants, the term seems to fit how Amber and Cassie felt about the course. We generally think about transparent as something being clear or easy to see. In terms of this online written communications course, both Amber and Cassie were impressed with how clear all expectations of the course were, from the due dates to the grading rubrics to the exact details of every upcoming assignment.

The first positive element of course organization that they mentioned were the due dates. Amber stated that the course layout allowed her to plan ahead; she liked that it showed her “when everything is going to be due” so that she could determine, “when am I going to do all these things?” Cassie echoed this sentiment. She appreciated that assignments all had specific due dates:

Yeah, so there was a deadline for each assignment that you did, and so whenever I did the discussion posts, they were due...whenever they were due it was nice seeing that, “Oh, well, I don’t have to worry about that ‘cause I already did it.” And then the big assignments, they all had a due date.

Amber had a similar appreciation for the organization of the course, indicating that the faculty member “was very good at planning and giving us everything we need to know beforehand, which helps a lot.” Amber values organization of a course to a high degree, because “what they are giving you up front and their organization reflects how, as a teacher, good they are and how much experience they have.”

As an example of how students used course organization to better engage with the course, Cassie talked about the positive aspect of what she calls an “opportunity to look ahead and see the whole schedule”:

Yeah, that’s something that whenever I have taken other online courses, I like when they have the schedule of when stuff is gonna be due, even if you don’t have access to do the homework number six, that it’s gonna be due in the end of April. But I think at least knowing, and for me I like to write it out in my planner and color-code everything so I can look and be like, “Oh, in two weeks I’m gonna have that due,” or whenever it opens. That’s something that I think, like, consistency is really good, too. One of the classes I took, the homework opened at 12:01 a.m., so she would have everything due at like 11:59. It was like the same day. It wasn’t like a random Wednesday night or random Thursday night. It was the same time, like Friday night...it would open at the same time, so you knew when you would have access and how long you would have to do it.

The participants were not looking forward to the larger projects in the course, but each felt that the organization of the course allowed them to feel productive because they could complete easier assignments first. When discussing not just the online communications course, but other online courses they had taken, both students indicated that being able to plan ahead and having predictable due dates and time windows in which to complete work was key to their engagement and peace of mind.

This communications course happened to allow for some of the work to be completed ahead of time and they appreciated that. It brought them a sense of accomplishment. Cassie stated:

There was one of the first days that I was like, “I’m gonna spend a good portion of this day just getting a lot of the little assignments done,” which was more to have it done so I didn’t have to worry about it later on.

Amber, too, took care of these tasks early, saying “then they weren’t as hard or didn’t require as much effort from your side doing them.” She expressed an interest in saving time for the larger projects that caused her stress. Amber did indicate that she didn’t work far enough ahead towards the end of the course and had to complete many larger assignments in the last week. She expressed regret about this but indicated that she felt highly engaged while doing the work the last week.

The teaching assistant participants referred to organization largely in terms of how many details were shared on the LMS. For example, Grace stated how everything was laid out intentionally so that students could work on some of the assignments early; “the assignments, the syllabus is very detailed, and then the assignments are all detailed on [the LMS], so the students can pretty much work through it at their own pace.” Jennifer echoed this later. It was not clear if the course was well-organized because it was online, or because it had a short, condensed timeframe for a course that was originally 16-weeks long. Regardless, Grace stated that she:

would argue right now especially, the online course is better laid out than the in-person class as of this semester, because this semester is the first time we’ve done a huge seminar class with the in-person modeled after the online.... I think the online version has been proven.

The fact that all assignments were posted and visible at the beginning of the course, with rich details available for all of them, was intentional, as Grace stated:

We do offer all of that information in the beginning because it is such a short class. And even with the in-person class, we offer that. They can see what assignments they're going to do. It's transparent. They know what we expect of them, and we kind of are there to guide them through it and to answer questions.

Vivian indicated the transparency of the course was the result of multiple semesters of improving the course based on areas where she saw students struggle. She took both student and teaching assistant feedback each semester and made adjustments for the following year. The course organization allowed students to be autonomous in their learning while keeping them aware of due dates, assignment expectations, and the overall course expectations.

Grace and Jennifer mentioned that the faculty member, Vivian, had sent emails prior to the course beginning to the enrolled students in the course, laying the groundwork for such organization. These intentional emails were sent to help keep the students organized. The teaching assistants and faculty member all alluded to a large email send a month before the semester/course began that was repeated in other formats closer to the start of the semester.

Grace stated:

[The faculty member] sends her big scary email that says, "Hey, this is going to be a lot of work," and she does that to make sure that the students that are just signed up for no reason aren't wasting their time or our time. It's a lot easier if everybody really wants to be in the class, and usually that does weed out a few people that don't actually want to be in the class or didn't realize what they were taking.

The goal was to inform students early of expectations and to support them throughout the course with information. Jennifer and Grace both stated that they are in the course to help students and to remind them daily of tasks; the course must utilize a clear structure in the LMS in order to

support students. Later, additional emails were sent during the course if adjustments were needed to inform students, because, as Jennifer stated, “maybe we didn’t give them enough information on this, so let’s send out an announcement and edit this assignment description to include more details or something like that, if we receive enough confusion.”

Vivian, the faculty member, agreed. Regarding her large initial email to enrolled students, she stated that:

I send an email before the class starts, usually right after Thanksgiving (a month before class) saying this class isn’t a joke. You have to have internet access the entire time.

You will have to submit things every day. You will be receiving three credit hours for three weeks of work, so if you tell me you’re going to the bowl game or whatever, good for you, but you have to work in your hotel room.... I think it’s better to let them know up front, and then they can make an educated decision about whether this class is gonna work for them or not.

Vivian is intentional about course organization from the first email sent through the conclusion of the last project. Vivian stated that she makes sure that information is displayed well, clearly, and concisely. Vivian showed me in the LMS that each assignment links to directions for the assignment and to the grading matrix used for the assignment, and some assignments even link to textbook information or outside resources for that assignment. It was evident that steps were taken not to have contradictory or confusing information in the LMS. In our discussions, she demonstrated how she had changed this content over time based on student feedback each semester.

One of the pieces of data collected for this case study was the course syllabus. The faculty member provided a copy of the syllabus used during the January Intersession course of

2018. Having the specific syllabus was important because it changes from semester to semester as the course changes based on student feedback or issues that come up during each semester.

The syllabus lists contact information for the faculty member and teaching assistants on the first page with clear bullet points detailing the course's description and objectives. This course is described as:

- Résumé writing and applying for a job
- Business correspondence
- Audience analysis
- Critical thinking
- Evaluating information sources
- Secondary research
- Technology in the context of written and oral communication

The textbook and course technology are discussed as being the primary course materials.

Readings and quizzes get a separate heading, conveying the faculty member's belief in the importance of readings in the course; readings are directly related to quizzes and assignments in the course. The syllabus has many of the same standard elements represented in all syllabi, but it is unique in that each heading makes clear how each element is important to the course, if not also how it is relevant to the student. As expected, policies take up two pages. The serious tone is set with a detailed late policy, which is critically important for students to read and understand since the course is only three weeks long. Another unique feature is that one third of a page is devoted to email procedures. Not only does the faculty member set the expectation that she will not be responding to emails late at night, she clearly outlines expectations for appropriate email etiquette and format. Lastly, each assignment is listed with a due date, points available, and an

empty column where students can mark their own points earned in the course and keep track of their grades. The syllabus is both emailed to enrolled students and is available in the LMS. The faculty member showed me how many of the assignments have their own documents in the LMS with much greater detail.

**Faculty members need to be proficient with LMS tools.** During our discussion on organization, Cassie brought up another element of the course that, to her, seemed to take organization to a higher level: utilizing the LMS tools. Cassie told me:

I feel like the way they had the [LMS] page set up was really organized, and so that made it a lot easier. I do have a class right now that [...], instead of utilizing the modules, he just has everything posted on the main page. So now that we're about to take our third exam, you have to scroll halfway down just to find the notes or things like that, and so that's something that I've noticed that I'm like, "Oh, well, I wish he did this." 'Cause you can minimize the modules, so you're like, "Oh, this is exactly what I'm looking at."

And so that's something that I liked, how organized it was for the [redacted] class. She continued to demonstrate that the communications course made it possible to close modules no longer being used, or to hide content tabs from the past so that students could focus on pertinent information rather than swim through the entire course's content every time they opened the LMS. This was a characteristic that she found within the communications course that she liked, but not all of her faculty members were using. Cassie was so impressed that she would later retell this same story again.

Cassie spoke about poor use of the LMS as akin to being distracted in the course every day. She grew animated and frustrated talking about another course that has all its course content on a file page with no tabs or modules to organize the content. Poorly organized courses,



she stated, were difficult to engage with as a student. An organized course layout, such as in the communications course, on the other hand, helped her focus and engage with pertinent content, thereby not losing valuable time or being distracted.

Cassie, too, valued reminders and the calendar in the LMS. The online communications course used the calendar in the LMS so that students could visualize due dates rather than be forced to look for them in the text of the syllabus. Students can then use the embedded calendar system to remind them when tasks are due. Cassie used that tool whenever she could.

Vivian has used other elements of the LMS to teach her courses in the past but discussed with me that utilizing these tools herself is not the same as leveraging them for the benefit of students. In the past, Vivian tried to take advantage of the LMS Wiki, a repository of information that can be searched by students and organized by question or topic. Anytime Vivian or the teaching assistants had a question or concern from students, they made sure to improve the course and to place answers to the questions in the Wiki. Vivian found that students did not use the system and kept asking the same questions. It was not a tool that the students were familiar with, nor did they find it helpful. Because of this, it was scratched.

**Short online courses keep students focused.** The online communications course binding my case study was a three-week intersession course; one of the aspects of this course that engaged student participants was that something was due daily. Had I interviewed students about a 16-week course, I would have missed these brief but meaningful thoughts about condensed online courses. Both student participants remarked that other shorter-duration courses (three-week, eight-week, or 10-week) held their engagement through to the end of the course, whereas 16-week online courses did not. Each student participant used a phrase similar to “checking out” between tasks for 16-week online courses. They remarked that in a 16-week

online course, they completed the work for the week generally on one day, and then forgot about the course until another assignment was due.

Amber remarked that she might not have felt the same engagement for this course if it had been offered during the 16-week semester, but she admitted that there would likely be work assignments due weekly; turning something in each week would have increased her engagement. Part of her concern in maintaining engagement over 16 weeks stemmed from the topic of “communications” itself; she felt that she was a poor writer. She stated, when talking about students taking online courses in subject areas that they did not like or that did not relate to their majors, that students “take them because they almost have to or it’s a way to get three creds out of the way in three weeks, which is pretty appealing.”

Cassie remarked that she could not imagine doing the course over 16 weeks because she felt there were not enough assignments to fill the full 16 weeks. She, too, agreed there would likely be more work over 16 weeks than they did in the three-week course, but did not see herself being engaged for a longer time period. She stated:

I had to keep thinking like, “I just have to do it until this three weeks, or until I finish this.” And so I feel like that was...if it was a different class it could have been different, but since it was writing and I hate writing, so that kind of made it more difficult, but also nice that I didn’t have to spend a semester writing and doing everything.

Cassie remarked a few times how much she liked her eight-week courses because she could focus on the content for a shorter time and then move on. She stated:

I’m planning to enroll in [an online course] for next semester, and so that one would be an eight-week course, and so then I’m like, “okay, that makes it even easier. Yeah, I’ll put in work for eight weeks, but then it’s over.”

Vivian agreed that the intersession approach allowed students to take a deep dive into a subject area without other distractions or other courses. Vivian stated:

I do think because we have daily things they have to do that there is a level of engagement that's required that's maybe higher than the in-person class because they have to think about it every day for at least some portion, whereas the in-person class they can go off and do other things, and they're probably taking four or five other classes maybe even that day. So it does have to be kind of all-consuming for a shorter period of time.

With tasks due daily, it is hard to ignore the three-week course, even at the most basic engagement level of just participating. With either a quiz or assignment due every day, the ever-present threat of losing points and failing the course would be enough to keep even the most reluctant writer on task. In addition, the high touch nature of teaching assistants grading daily and reaching out would mean that there was no excuse for not knowing where you stood in the course.

It is worth noting how much time faculty members, teaching assistants, and students spent within the LMS during the three weeks of this course. The hours spent within the LMS included a wide range of learning activities such as reading assignment descriptions and grade rubrics, writing discussion boards, emailing, taking quizzes, and writing comments regarding the assignments. Additional time spent on the course (not included in the LMS report) includes grading outside the LMS, writing papers, reading the textbook, or general studying. The faculty member provided data from the LMS for my review. During the three-week course, students spent an average of 12 hours and 49 minutes logged into the course in the LMS. Extreme

outliers were not used in my calculations since it was possible for students to leave the course open in a website for hours and not log out or be timed out.

The two student participants granted me permission to view their LMS course time specifically. Amber spent 19 hours and 13 minutes in the course while Cassie spent 13 hours and 41 minutes in the course. While it is easy to see the length of time in which the course was open on their computers, what cannot be seen is how much of the time that the course was open were they engaged and participating in the course. Teaching assistants, on the other hand, spent an average of 23 hours in the course. Their time in the LMS ranged from 13 hours to 40 hours. The faculty member shared that some teaching assistants were far more invested in marking up grammar and punctuation errors, which, while included as a component of the grading rubrics, was not a requirement beyond looking for overarching themes in students' errors and sharing them with the students. Some teaching assistants may have had higher levels of email and interactions with students, requiring more time in the course. The faculty member mentioned at one point that students for whom English is a second language really struggled and needed more assistance in the course. Finally, teaching assistants may have just left the course open on their computers for more hours while working on other tasks.

**Course resources must hold purpose and special value.** The student participants spoke about the resources they used to engage with the course, especially the subject matter of written communication. Although certainly a resource, the LMS itself ended up falling under the code of organization primarily due to the students' focus on organization as a high priority for them to be engaged. Although the LMS had important resources embedded within it, the student participants spoke about two course-related resources that they felt engaged them in online learning. The first resource, the textbook, is specific to the course itself. The second, while one

that was not discussed with frequency, was discussed with passion: video. The student participants appreciated that this course was not heavy with lengthy videos of the faculty member talking.

***The textbook is a beacon for students.*** The textbook for this course was written by the lead faculty member, Vivian, and another faculty member in the department. It is available online or as hardcopy through Kendall Hunt Publishing and is 138 pages. Both student participants commented about the low cost of \$65, but the students had much more to say about the usefulness of the textbook as a primary resource in the course itself and for the future. Both student participants spoke with excitement; they really had appreciated the textbook.

Cassie told me right away that “the textbook [...] was really beneficial.” She appreciated the directness, simplicity, and brevity. She explained her use of her digital copy as:

whenever I got on, it wasn’t like, “read these 30 pages,” it was like, “read these three pages,” and then it was examples. So, for the cover letter it had an example of a cover letter with parts of it explained, and so that I enjoyed because I don’t have a super long attention span, so sitting down to read 30 pages isn’t something that I just wanna do.

Cassie told me that there are courses where she rarely uses the textbook because they are too wordy with information and not pertinent to the course. We met during the fourth month of the spring semester and she reported that for the semester, she had some books she had only looked at once. Because the communications textbook was written specifically for their course, it became a quick reference. She read parts “over and over again and [found] things that I hadn’t heard before. That was really helpful.” She explained that it was a textbook she was planning to keep as a professional reference and didn’t mind reading again.

Amber bought the physical copy of the textbook. She said right away when asked about resources:

Yeah, I loved the book and I still have the book, because it's a \$65 book. It's not expensive, which makes it even better. You have to buy it anyways. It helps you ace the quizzes. It has a lot of insight for writing papers, different types of papers. If I ever have to do that again, then I would have everything that would help me, a nice little reference. She spoke of the textbook as the "greatest resource I got out of that course" and that people who didn't take the course should just have it as a reference. The applicability of the textbook made it engaging to her, because "you took [what you needed] right out of the book and it laid out what you were supposed to do, and you applied it to your own life." These were strong words from someone who started our interview stating how much she disliked writing.

Vivian told me that the textbook options changed over the last few years. Prior to the current textbook, she had been using a textbook from a large publishing company that came with its own quizzes and learning labs. She has an extra credit opportunity at the end of all her courses that includes asking the students for feedback about the course. She told me:

Students were not loving that aspect [the online textbook site] or really using it because it was another login. It was another... it was ran through the textbook, so it was a whole separate thing, and the students that were using it, I don't think were the students that needed it because it was another thing to figure out. So yeah, I didn't feel like it was a real loss that we lost that.

To make up for the resources lost when transitioning away from the previous textbook, Vivian links to resources such as Purdue OWL or Grammar Girl. She found that students appreciated

her writing a textbook that is much more direct, concise, and practical for the communications course.

*Videos must be short, succinct, purposeful.* When I asked the student participants about course resources and the content of the course, I specifically asked about how the course was taught. I asked this of each student participant, not to learn more about the course, but to hear what resonated with them as being important. When responding to this question, they discussed the textbook and emails from the faculty member. I asked a probing question about any videos the course included. I received far longer and more passionate answers than I expected to with this question. The student participants told me about their prior experiences with video and what uses of video engaged them as well as what uses of video in online courses they dislike.

The student participants started telling me how few videos there were in the online communications course. Amber stated that the faculty member may have made one of the videos as an introduction, but any other videos were just links (optional helpful resources). The other people in those video links turned out to be the library staff on campus explaining how their services can help students with the writing required for the course. Amber did not feel that the course required videos to explain anything else. Cassie remembered, too, that there was an introduction from the faculty member, but that there were other videos from the on-campus library. She recalled her first reaction to seeing any video in the course:

I remember being like, "Wow, I don't wanna watch these videos, they're gonna take forever," and they were like five minutes long or something, so for me, it's like, "Oh, okay, it's only five minutes long. I can watch that." But whenever it's like a 20-minute video, I'm like, I'm probably not gonna watch that, or I'm not gonna pay attention to it.

As it turned out, most of the video in the course was an embedded module on how to use the library. Cassie spoke well of the video; it showed that the faculty member had worked with the librarians and the librarians understood the projects required for the course. Both student participants stated that the videos were short, to the point, and engaging. Because the videos showed the faculty member speaking with the library staff, they instilled trust in the students that the library would know how to help them if they needed it.

Without being prompted, each student participant began to reflect on their previous experiences with video in online and hybrid courses. Amber told me:

I feel like you can't have that much video in a two- or three-week course because you don't have time for all that. It's too time-consuming. It's got to be quick and snappy.

You're gonna have to put a lot of work into it in a short amount of time. So, no, I probably would not have been engaged and would have said, "Ok, well, I don't have time to do this." It'd been something I'd be more apt to skip over.

Amber made it clear that had the course included video, she would not have watched them and may have dropped the course. She shared about the last time her online course had videos, preferencing "short videos over anything. I hate long videos. 'Cause my attention ... I [thought] 'OK, this is getting boring. I don't care anymore.' It's also hard if you're not there." She told me that she did take a hybrid course on campus and they had one to two 25-minute videos each week. She found that videos were "good in moderation." Her preference, she indicated, was not to watch lengthy videos because she could not engage in them.

Cassie spoke with me about previous courses she had taken. She offered some perspectives on video length as well as style. She told me about a previous online course that ended in a grade of "B" because she did not watch the videos. She stated that they were videos



made from PowerPoint slides with voiceover; there was no video of the faculty member speaking. She said, "you're just kind of like, almost like it's in slow motion, you're just waiting for them to say what's next or just keep talking." She grew tired of them and did not watch the videos and admitted that she did not learn much from the course. She reflected that in the next course with video,

I have to have that certain amount of time that I'm gonna sit down and watch the lectures as if I was at a class on campus. I can't just be like, "Oh, well, I'll do it tomorrow, I don't have to do it now."

Cassie felt like faculty members slowed their speech when making videos for online courses when they are not in front of a classroom, hypothesizing that "whenever you are recording yourself and you're not used to recording yourself to post online, you're more conscious of what you're saying, and so it's just kinda a little bit slower." She likes the ability to adjust the speed of a video to speed through parts that are slow and then resume playback for important information. She does not like "sitting there waiting for them to get to the point." She remarked that only one of her professors was engaging with this video style and while he looked like he felt awkward, the professor acknowledged this feeling and made jokes about it. Cassie stated, "I remember him like, 'Here's where I would hope people would raise their hand, but no one will.'" To Cassie, the humor was a positive even if the video watching was painful.

Cassie confirmed that whether speaking to the camera, or to a classroom, short five-minute, to-the-point videos are best. She said that videoed lectures of a faculty member speaking to a classroom can get off topic and are distracting for a student watching online. She wants important information only. Included in important information, however, would be real students asking questions. She does feel that having students ask questions helps the faculty member

Speak about information relevant to all students. The downside of watching a video of a lecture to a real classroom, which both Cassie and Amber acknowledged, is that a campus student who is used to being in the classroom feels isolated. Cassie told me, "everyone else is there for that lecture" but she isn't. Her statement tied into the emphasis both Cassie and Amber put on peer relationships. Sitting alone in a room watching a lecture is disengaging.

The student participants did not specifically call out the many distractions available when watching videos. Grace, the teaching assistant who has not taken many online courses, did. As a graduate student, she was taking a course with videos and stated:

Once I get into it, it's fine, but when I open that window and then I'm like, "Oh, but I need to check my email, but I need to check Facebook..." So, I think the fact that this [communications course] is not video-based is probably helpful because they can just get on, see what they're doing, look at the instructions, and then say, "All right, I got to type a paper," type a paper and be done with it. So, I think that helps this class, and I think it helps the design. I think it helps students be more engaged and willing to take it, or at least want to recommend it after they take it perhaps.

Overall, the student participants had strong feelings about video, and from what they shared, their engagement in the online communications course was higher because there were few videos, and those that were included were short and resource-heavy.

### **Strategic Relationships Add Value to Online Courses**

During our interviews, Amber and Cassie reflected on their relationships with the people in their communications course. Both student participants stated a clear preference for physical classroom learning because of the social aspect of interacting with other students and because of personal contact with a faculty member. I was interested in learning how relationships changed

(increased or decreased) the two student participants' engagement in the online communications course.

Early on, Amber stated that, "with any online class you're going to have that disengagement," referring to a lack of communication with peers and faculty members. When Amber told me how passionate she was about taking on-campus courses for the "in-person" or "social" engagement aspects, I did not expect for her to tell me that she valued her relationships with the teaching assistants and the faculty member in her intersession communications course.

The relationship theme is divided into three sub-themes: (1) teaching assistants and faculty member, (2) on-campus peers and (3) online peers. According to the participants, this course fostered positive engagement between the students, the teaching assistants, and the faculty member. In addition, students worked with their on-campus peers to maintain engagement in the course. Interestingly, the student participants were thankful that they did not have to interact with online peers. I received a distinct sense that were the student participants forced to interact with unknown online peers, their engagement in the course may have decreased.

**Teaching assistants and faculty member relationships must be curated.** The online communications course was led by a faculty member and her nine teaching assistants and enrolled approximately 132 online students. The teaching assistants were each assigned groups of 18-20 students per teaching assistant; Jennifer called these "learning communities." The role of each teaching assistant was to directly communicate with, grade, and provide feedback to their learning community of students. According to the student participants, this added value to the course. Cassie told me:

they have it split up with the TAs, and so you did get the feedback from your TA, which I enjoyed having that, because I knew that my TA was putting work into her 10 students or

20 students and not just a teacher trying to get through it all. And so I felt like when she did give feedback, it was genuine. Like I knew what she was talking about, and she would reference things that you did.

Cassie went on to say that she had never gotten to know a teaching assistant before, but the teaching assistants seemed to respond more quickly than most faculty members because they were not working with a large number of students. She felt “that they had been in [her] situation” as a student relatively recently and they likely would have taken a similar course themselves, so they knew what it was like to be a student.

Amber, too, stated that her relationship with a teaching assistant was positive, saying, “she was very helpful, very, very helpful.” She explained that:

If I had a question, I could email my TA or [the faculty member] who taught the class and get a quick response and a lot of help. If I needed something or wanted some clarification, they always gave it to me, and it was very prompt.

Although Amber stated that she emailed the faculty member, I was later told that any emails to the faculty member were quickly responded to, but most often the response redirected the student to the assigned teaching assistant for assistance. Amber used another term to describe her relationship with teaching assistants, “professional,” saying, “I feel like interactions between teachers and TAs and students should probably be pretty professional.” As I got to know and understand Amber, I learned that this was important to her and signified her great respect for her teaching assistant.

Both student participants found the online teaching assistants important for their positive engagement in the course. At no time (before, during, or after) did the students meet the teaching assistants or the faculty member in person. Grace later told me that it was rare for

teaching assistants to run into their students on campus unless a student failed the online course and decided to take the on-campus course for a better grade. She stated that rarely happens because students will simply take another elective and avoid retaking the communications course.

The student participants described to me how their relationships with the teaching assistants and faculty member began. First, the students read about the faculty member in the LMS; per Amber, “she had her own teacher page – I don’t know what it was called – where she kind of described about herself and had some links.” Cassie told me that next, they received some emails from the teaching assistants introducing themselves to the students in the course. Lastly, students received an assignment to introduce themselves to the teaching assistants. (I would learn about the added importance of this assignment later from the faculty member). Amber said this assignment “was mainly to put you in contact with your TAs so your TAs could put a face with a name.” Being a student who appreciates on-campus course settings, she added later, “it was like doing a first day in class introduction-type-thing, which was really nice. And so they got to know you. And then they said a little bit back about themselves in a comment back.” Cassie shared that this assignment added value over other online courses she had taken because it was a two-way introduction:

We did introduction posts and so she [the teaching assistant] had posted an introduction and everything, so that was nice, ‘cause I have had classes in the past where they don’t say anything, and so you’re just kinda like, “Okay, I have no idea who you are.”

Both student participants felt that receiving an introduction from the teaching assistants and faculty member, as well as sending an introduction about themselves, set a positive tone for the rest of the course. The relationship they created was reflected later in other themes, adding

personal meaning to assignment feedback and helping the students feel like the course had greater personal value for them.

The student participants stated that they did not email the faculty member or teaching assistants many questions, but the personal information shared upfront between them created trust. Amber told me:

It just wasn't necessary to have to engage, I guess, because you don't see them face-to-face, and, quite honestly, I didn't need a lot of help in the course, so if I did need help, I felt like I could always talk to them.

Cassie explained that from her perspective:

I feel like because the way the teachers were, and the TAs sent an email introducing themselves, and the main teacher had a post on there and said, "Contact me with any questions or anything like that," I'm not really one that is scared to ask questions if I don't understand, so I never felt like I was alone or I couldn't ask for help. I could, I had that ability.

Both students, then, felt confident that if they needed assistance, they could easily reach out and access it, but felt that the course organization and clarity of instructions meant they didn't need to reach out at all most of the time in order to be successful.

In discussing the role of the course's teaching assistants with the teaching assistants themselves and the faculty member, similar thoughts were expressed. The organization of the teaching assistants appears to have worked as intended. Grace stated that her role was to "take specific blocks of students and they are told that we are their TA and so my students will contact me if they have questions or issues, and that way not just one person or not just [the faculty member] is getting all the questions." She said that she is "mostly there to grade and answer

questions.” Jennifer echoed similar thoughts, saying, “announcements and, like, general information will come from the faculty member, but the communication and, like, building the relationship of...and feedback method is all from us.” Vivian confirmed the structure; she said that she leads the teaching assistants, but that:

my role at that point becomes much more of a facilitator than...I do all of the troubleshooting when people...all the quizzes are set to where they can only open them once and so there’s always some, particularly on the first one, that open it to see what it’s like and they can’t get back in, and so I try to do a lot of those kinds of things, but try to push a majority of their communication at that point to their TA unless there’s problems.

Her goal is to pair one teaching assistant with 16-18 enrolled students to keep the workload manageable for the teaching assistants, allowing the enrolled students to receive immediate help or attention as needed. And she reiterated that she redirected students back to the teaching assistant if they emailed her with any questions by saying, “Just so you know, I’ve also cc’d your TA, so this is who they are in case you forgot.” She had a good sense of the amount of time each day the teaching assistants should be grading or responding to the course and felt that they could answer student questions promptly while she dealt with backend issues.

All participants stated how important the first assignment, the introduction, was.

Jennifer, one of the teaching assistants, articulated it as being a piece that would influence her work with students throughout the entire course:

I think mostly what I focus on in the first part is getting to know them and, like, their interests, because I think that’s a big part of the direction their résumé would take, or the direction that they might be interested in something, so, like, maybe gear them toward...gear some of their projects, like, as a suggestion, “Well, maybe you’d be

interested in something like this?” I think learning about them is helpful in that way, because, then again, it helps them see the value of, like, “Oh, okay, well I get what you’re saying now,” if it’s something they are interested in. This is from the student information sheet that they just kind of write up. We give them prompt questions, but ultimately, it’s up to them to write up a little bit of themselves and things like that.

Grace explained her perspective on the introduction, saying:

one of their first assignments is a reflection, or like an introduction to themselves. So, we have them write what their majors are, what they like to do, that kind of thing. They do have that opportunity. A lot of them also pick projects and topics that are related to what they’re doing.

She added later in our conversation that,

they send us a picture of themselves, so we have a little bit more of a personal connection. They also send us their résumé, so we look at that in the beginning of the class, and that gives us a good look into their background and their interests, and it does help looking at later assignments that they turn in.

The introduction assignment includes more than just a simple response to questions about themselves. While this activity is intended to help students and teaching assistants get to know one another, Vivian says it is more complex than that.

Vivian told me that the introduction assignment “serves a lot of purposes.” She stated that this task includes the typical steps needed to upload an assignment in the LMS and is a great way to check that students know how to do this step before they are in a time crunch on handing in work later in the course. She asks for a picture because graphics will be used in some of their work later in the semester and students will need to know how to insert them into a document.



This allows for teaching assistants to make sure they can access documents once turned in, and if not, the teaching assistants and faculty member have time to work with students on the process before the first big projects are due. Students and teaching assistants will not have time to fix issues such as these later in the course.

The technical goals of the introduction assignment should not subtract from the importance that Jennifer, Grace, and Vivian placed on the relationships created by the assignment. The teaching assistants are the go-to staff for students and they valued having a personal understanding of who each student was in order to help them with their work. Jennifer told me that in her mind, the role of the teaching assistant was:

being that lean-to for students. In such a big class, I think the cap is at a hundred typically in the intersession, I think we really strive to make it a very personal relationship and by having enough TAs, we can get those numbers down small so that I can build a relationship with that person and if they have a question they can email me directly, and I'm more accessible than probably [the faculty member] is, serving as that help point.

She added that she wishes her own undergraduate online courses included such efforts; she did not feel that the faculty members knew or understood her. Grace expressed similar thoughts, saying:

I feel like it's important for me as a TA to make sure that the students know that I'm there for them, I want to help them, I know what they feel like, I know what they're going through, I've been there in the undergrad and I also am still a student too. That's the nice part about being TA, because I can be like, "Hey, guys, I understand. I'm a student too."

Interestingly, Grace reflected something stated by the student participants regarding being a student herself and understanding what it may be like to be an undergraduate student online. She felt that as a current graduate student, she could still relate as a student. She was clearly cognizant that building relationships takes more effort online, saying, “with the online class, it’s harder because I don’t have that face-to-face, that in-person opportunity.”

Grace’s last statement about the additional effort needed to build the online relationship prompted me to ask if she feels that success in the course requires engagement with other people. She stated, “I don’t. Well, I don’t know. I think it definitely helps to have some kind of relationship with the TAs.” Although, Grace reiterated, it is not always easy to connect with students. Her relationships with students are different when she teaches online compared to when she teaches in person. She described how she may communicate in person with a student to share concerns about a paper, sitting them down and saying, “Hey, you’re not going to get hired if you put this like this.” She can have a dialogue with a student and be present with that student. In an online course, Grace expressed concern over being easily ignored. She stated,

Things like that, online, I can say those things, but people can also choose to – I’m just a screen at that point – so people can choose to listen to the all-knowing computer screen, or they could say, “Hey, I don’t even know this person. What do they know about writing a résumé?”

She continued later in our conversation to say:

you can only put so many words in front of people. So, on campus, I can stand up in the front of the class and say, “Oh, guys, I remember now, I need to tell you this.” But if I’m sending 500 messages a day, “Oh, hey, I forgot to tell you this,” “Oh, remember this,”

then nobody wants to be bombarded by emails. It's different when we tell people things, but you can't always send [LMS] announcements out and fill up everybody's inboxes. To Grace, in-person communication and the personal relationship built in an on-campus course made connecting easier, while connecting online required far more thought and professionalism, and even then, students could choose to read her words or not.

Vivian feels that the engagement of the teaching assistants is important in her course. She sees that they all care about students. They pay attention to the students' engagement or even lack of engagement and look for ways to keep them afloat in the course. She told me that the teaching assistants tend to ask what is happening with a student when they start to do poorly or turn in assignments but don't seem to get the concepts. It is the negative engagement that concerns Vivian most. She looks for students who lack a relationship to the course, stating, "Particularly in the intersession if there are people that haven't logged on the first day, you know, we do check that," and they email those students to try to connect. After the first assignment, she notes that "They won't fail if they don't submit the student information sheet, but it's a sure sign that they haven't been reading all the emails and aren't prepared and should maybe drop the class." In a short course, she understands that if students are not engaged right away, they will have great difficulty passing the course.

**On-campus peers add value to online learning.** The student participants spoke often about their friends in the course, friends from campus, and how important those on-campus peers were to their engagement in the course. These students had chosen to sign up and take the course together so that they did not feel alone in the course. Listening to the student participants speak, I had a sense that these were some of the same students who would gather for study sessions locally in the campus library during the traditional semester.

Amber described her group of friends as “a group of three of us that...of three of my friends that worked together on it.” Two of the friends were located close together, living near campus over break, but at their parents’ homes. She stated, “my best friend, [redacted], and I would sit down and do assignments together. She came over to my house almost every week and over Christmas break and we would always set aside a time to do a few of these.” One of the friends was hours away and would be conferenced into these meetings via phone. When they were not together, they phoned or texted. Amber said, “I don’t think I emailed anyone. I just used my phone. ‘Cause they were friends of mine, so I didn’t have to email them. Text and call.” She did not use social media to communicate with them, because, as she stated, “when you have someone’s phone number, everything gets a lot simpler.” Amber explained that one of the primary benefits of having friends to work with is that they kept her accountable for doing the work and helped her maintain engagement in the course.

Cassie had a similar statement about her peer support group:

There was two of the people that I’m good friends with, that they took it at the same time, so we talked about it. Which the three big projects were on a topic you had chosen, and so it wasn’t like we could really collaborate on what we were writing about, but I had one of them, we would send each other our stuff and proofread it and things like that, and so that helped me, ‘cause I’m not much of a writing [person], and so it helped whenever she would go through it and be like, “Oh, yeah, your grammar’s messed up,” or whatever, and helped it make more sense.

Although Cassie’s peer group was like Amber’s and would communicate over the phone, Cassie utilized this group to both feel camaraderie in the course and to create an ad-hoc system of tutoring in lieu of using the writing center or tutoring on campus. She continued:

we would be like kind of working on it at the same time and able to send each other like our rough drafts and have that. I feel like that was really beneficial to completing the course, but also completing whatever I was working on and completing it better than if I didn't have that ability.

It seemed that this group (or one like it) had helped each other in other courses prior to this course, because Cassie let me know in another part of our meeting that she had never used the writing center on campus, although she knew about it.

In my interview with Jennifer, we spoke about the population enrolled in the course, and she did state that the course was primarily to reach off campus students. She felt strongly that if possible, “you should take this in person because we can give you so much more out of it.” Jennifer believes in personal instruction as the best way to teach in her field. But regarding student engagement and friends who were taking the course online together, Jennifer did admit that it is helpful. She said that she could tell that some on-campus students were taking the course together and “that’s always a good resource to have someone who’s with you.”

Sometimes, having that group could be a temptation. Most of the communications course focuses on large personal projects and papers; however, there are a number of quizzes and those should be done individually according to the syllabus:

It is assumed all work will be completed independently unless the assignment is defined as a group project, in writing by the instructor. **This policy will be vigorously upheld at all times in this course.**

The syllabus contained a copy of the campus honor pledge. One of the participants told me that her group worked with another student to take quizzes together in addition to bouncing ideas off each other. She admits, “I don’t know if we were supposed to, but we did it anyways.” Vivian

told me about the quizzes when she was going over the course structure. She stated that some of them are used for teaching certain concepts and retaken multiple times, explaining that “we say these quizzes are supposed to be taken independently, but there could be a group of them that are taking them together.” Since the quizzes could be retaken for a better grade and were more about concept mastery than course grade points, the faculty member was not concerned enough about students completing them alone to require that they be proctored.

**On-campus students avoid online peers.** It is difficult to discuss how on-campus peers supported engagement in an online course without recognizing the existence of online peers. The course’s faculty member and teaching assistants did not facilitate any interactions between students, so all the peer-to-peer communication, if any, was developed by students. Although students could have interacted with one another through the course/LMS, they chose not to. This was clear from comments made by the student participants, teaching assistants, and faculty member.

When asking about engagement with online peers, formal or informal, both student participants first reacted against informal interactions. Amber had already stated, “I’m a people person” when referring to her preference for on-campus courses. Regarding online courses in general, she said, “if you were solely online, that would be your downfall,” you would not know people personally in the course. She told me about her use of social media and made clear that her online friends are all people she knows in person. When asked what she might do in this course if she had not signed up knowing that friends were in the course, she went through an evolution of thoughts. She first said, “that’s the great thing about [the LMS] is you can see who’s in your class if the teachers release that. So, I love that feature.” She would find other

students on campus, perhaps in her department, and then connect with them knowing that they had met previously “in class.” She said that her:

support system is still the people in that class...there'll be someone you know on that list.

You'll never be in a class with someone you don't know. So we knew a bunch of people in it if we ever had to...I could have been like, “Hey!” I felt comfortable enough knowing people that I could reach out to them.

Later, Amber indicated that she may get more comfortable and reach out to other students, but she qualified this by saying other “on-campus” students who were not in her department. She said, “I'm bold enough that I probably would have been like, ‘Hey! Anyone! Are you struggling with this too?’” She continued to say,

it is harder to engage when you don't know anyone and don't have the incentive to engage with anyone. If I was doing poorly in a class, I would try harder to engage with my peers than if I was not doing poorly.

Finally, she added that in a situation where she was doing poorly, she would “just shoot them an email, I mean, what's the worse they can do. Tell you no? Then go on.” Amber decided that she may come to a point where she needed peer engagement enough to reach out to students off campus, but it took some talking it out before she admitted being comfortable with that option.

Cassie shared experiences where she had taken courses in which she did not know anyone else prior to taking the courses. She told me about a time when she did reach out, but she did not care for the experience:

Yeah, so two of the classes that I've previously taken I didn't know anyone else in them so that's something that I feel like does make it harder because. . . I just looked up there, looked at the people on [the LMS] and emailed them and I feel like it's kind of weird, so

I don't really tell a lot of people. But that's, like for the [course] I took last semester, and so I did know one other girl in that class, but we kind of were on the same page and like have the same way of thinking. I reached out to other people before the final. Hearing how they did and like the problems they missed and their way of doing it and like working through that helped. But I still think it's kind of weird, just getting this random email.

She stated that she considered reaching out to those who have a well-written profile in the LMS, figuring that they would put a similar effort into their profile as they would their schoolwork. But it was clear that she was not going to try to reach out to random students again. She did not explain any bad situations, but simply stated that it was awkward and made her uncomfortable. She told me that she would rather find friends on campus who have taken the course before seeking out anyone else online for additional support.

When asked about any formal online peer interactions, both student participants mentioned that in this communications course there was no incentive to interact with online peers and they did not miss it. Amber stated that she had her own on-campus group of friends and that met her peer needs. She said that she has taken courses in the past that use online discussion boards to facilitate dialogue between online students. She stated, "I don't like those, whatever. It's trying to get you to talk to your peers. It's really hard to do that in an online course." She continued, saying, "I would just post and never look at it again." She did not find this element engaging.

Cassie went into more depth. She had taken a course once that included required (and graded) discussion board participation. She provided an example of a discussion board where



students posted their thoughts and then were required to respond to a prescribed number of posts made by other students:

Yeah, like one of the classes I took this summer that did the discussion posts the weekly ones or whatever, that I feel like gives a little bit more of the belonging feeling because you're commenting on those posts. Someone that you've commented on before you're like, "Oh, they always have good points," so you're going to kind of look for that person or they're giving you feedback, stuff like that makes it a little better with like actually feeling like you're in a class with classmates. Yeah, I feel that does help the engagement, but I feel like it kind of can be frustrating because if I get it done on Monday and it has to be done Thursday night if you have to comment on five posts and only three people posted then you're just kind of waiting on other people to step up and do it. I feel like a lot of times online classes or just in general people wait 'til the last minute. It's kind of like you can't really get ahead because you're waiting on other people...I would find myself posting and then waiting for other people. 'Cause you can't... so it was like, "Oh, well, I got my part done, but I still have to go back and do this other part," but you're waiting. Well, what am I supposed to do? Is it gonna affect my grade or what am I supposed to do, because no one else is doing theirs?

She spoke as if this forced peer activity was more like a job than an organic classroom discussion. She appreciated seeing what people posted on their own but had no interest in interacting with those students. She found some of their thoughts engaging, and it felt like a course, but direct interaction with her peers, especially for an assignment, was off putting; Cassie was quite frustrated in our discussion.

The teaching assistants felt that the online communications course is smoother without asking online peers to relate to one another or work on group work. Jennifer said outright, “I know that they often don’t find group work fun. Especially in an online setting, it can be easy to hit ignore.” She mentioned that students may reach out to one another if they find something particularly interesting in their LMS personal profile but did not say that it happened frequently. Grace told me that this course is more, “of a professional development, like they’re working on their résumé, they’re working on stuff like that. It’s more individual.” She, too, said that students can read each other’s profile, but they have not had great success getting students to fill out their profile information. She told me that students especially do not want to put their picture in the profile on the LMS. She said that she understands, and they are not going to push the student to do something with which they are not comfortable. Otherwise, Grace stated, “there’s not as many opportunities online for them to actually get to know their classmates. It’s more of an individual thing.” She reiterated that it is more beneficial to engage with their teaching assistant.

Vivian explained the history of peer engagement in the intersession course and in other online undergraduate courses. She stated that the first courses she taught did have group work, specifically in the form of an online blog. She told me that not only were the students not prepared for that level of writing, “I made them interact with each other and it turns out undergrads don’t want to interact with each other, so that piece just didn’t quite work for them.”

### **Course Content Must be Presented as Relevant to Win over Students**

When looking through transcripts for meaningful phrases that were used repeatedly, the only phrases that came up more than once were akin to, “I’m not good at writing,” “I don’t care for this subject,” “I’m not a writer,” or “writing papers put me in a bad mood.” The word “hate”

was used twice. Yet each student participant used phrases such as, “I got a lot out of that class,” “you were doing something useful,” and “I could see how this would help me later.” Student participants reported coming into the course with distaste for the course subject, but I got a clear sense that each student participant left the course with greater respect for the subject than when they started. Their discussion of the course content reflects a journey from a distaste of writing to embracing what the course had to offer because they realized just how important the course was to their personal futures. The overall theme of embracing the subject area is summarized in each of the interviews, emphasizing the engagement students had with this course.

Both student participants told me that the course was focused on written communication. One of the reasons they took the course online was because it was not a major requirement and it was something they did not like. Taking it online in three weeks was appealing because they did not have to invest too much of their time. They were not sure there was even a reason for taking the course since they each had a résumé already completed. Amber told me, “I’m not good at writing, I’m not a creative soul at all,” and “I’m not crazy about the subject area just because I am not a comm major. I don’t like to write.” She saw that the course required at least one large paper and that was overwhelming. She said, “if it can’t be said in a sentence, it doesn’t need to be said.” However, she completed the course and found value in the assignments.

Cassie had similar feelings but spoke with more passion. She told me early in our interview that, “I think mostly for me since this was more of a writing class that was probably my biggest challenge because I really hate writing.” The word “hate” resonated as a strong word choice, but her tone indicated that she meant it. She used an exchange with her mother as an example of how writing affected her during the course:

I am not a writer so that I really struggled with, and just, I remember I'd been working on the paper for like four or five hours, and I was just in a bad mood just because I'm not... I like kinda more math or I'm more of like, I'd rather study than write a paper. And so I remember my mom being like, "Why are you in such a bad mood?" And I was like, "Because I hate writing so much." And so it was just kinda, I had to keep thinking like, "I just have to do it until this three weeks, or until I finish this." And so I feel like that was...if it was a different class it could have been different, but since it was writing and I hate writing, so that kind of made it more difficult, but also nice that I didn't have to spend a semester writing and doing everything.

The student participants, however, told me that they began to picture the course differently when they understood how the course applied to their lives and future careers. After telling me she was not "crazy about the subject area," Amber concluded "but I think there's a lot of practical application and skills that you do need to extract from the course to do what I want to do in life." She told me that she was a verbal person and she learned that she did need to work on her writing. What helped her understand the importance of good writing was that she "was also writing about something I cared about," as she put it. She added "that's always easier to write about something that you know about and have personal experiences with rather than something that you would have nothing at all" in common with. She felt that the course, faculty member, and teaching assistant framed writing as it "connected you to real life experiences and going on for your success after college." She said that engagement for her has to be personal and if you are going to engage in any course, you have to see that you are going to "get something out of it" rather than just learning information for the sake of learning it.

Amber said that you have to be aware of this practical and personal connection early during the course too. She said that she learned about the importance of another course far too late. She did not engage with a previous course during a previous semester and that led to skipping class multiple times. At the time, she did not see the application of the course to her daily life. Looking back, she remarked, “Oh, I had to take this because I’m gonna have to deal with people every day of my life and like learn a little bit about how people work even if it’s not your major.” Did this course change her interest in writing and communications? Amber quickly said “no.” But she said that she “could take back the skills I learned from this course and use them in other courses I’m taking as a traditional student, so [it’s] helpful.” Cassie agreed that she learned just how important the subject was personally. She stated:

It was a lot of résumé or kind of professional skills, and so that’s something that, like I completely redid my résumé and cover letter and that kind of stuff, and so having that and something to look at, and having someone give feedback, that I have found really beneficial using that now.

During the course, Amber liked the way the assignments related to one another; they were based on an area of interest to the student, built on each other, and even included one portion in which they applied for a job. She stated,

When we did it, we attached [...] a job that we were applying for. It was like you were actually doing it. That was helpful because I was like “Well, I’m going to apply for this,” but like knowing that I had to do it either way is kind of like a win-win because I had to turn it in for an assignment for a grade, but [I] also applied.

She said that the focus on “something that I had cared about before and had worked on previously and recently” really helped her engage with the course.

Cassie thought the way assignments built on each other helped her maintain engagement.

She stated:

yeah, so it was kinda like, three of the big projects built off each other, so it's like once you finish the first one, it wasn't just like it was done. It was like you had to take what you learned or what you did from the first part and take it on to the second part. And so it wasn't just getting this little part done, it was like you had to do it all to keep going.

She captured the same feeling Amber has spoken about regarding the connection each assignment had to the course. They did not feel like it was busy work, a term both used regarding other courses they did not engage with; they spoke as if they understood how each assignment together reflected a greater sense of purpose.

The teaching assistants told me that they can see a difference from when students start the course with preconceptions to when they become engaged with the course, understanding its importance. Each told me how important it is for them to help navigate students towards giving the course personal meaning. Jennifer explained that she wants to tell students, "Hey, we are trying to help you, this is going to benefit you. It may not be benefiting you right now, but in a year when you're looking for a job" it will. She stated that students come in thinking that it will be easy, that it will be boring and simple because the subject just comes naturally. For incoming students, she said:

the value is not portrayed as it should be to them initially, like, it's not just another notch in your credit hours. I don't think that they see...I don't think other people are telling them that it's valuable either, so that part, and then I also think maybe there's a mindset that there's nothing wrong with the way I communicate or I write.

She said that students learn quickly that writing a résumé and professional documents is not easy and takes some personal attention. She said that while they may come into the course with an existing résumé, many of them learn quickly that they have not done it correctly and get frustrated that it takes more work than they expect. Jennifer feels that it is the teaching assistants' job to continue to help students understand that it does take work, but it will pay off. She told me that if they can help students see the value,

I think that they have a better attitude about it, they produce better work. It benefits them ultimately, and I think it makes us feel better. That's one of the things that I love about this course is actually seeing good come out of it from people.

Jennifer knows that students do not come to the course excited about the work, or appreciative of why the course may have some importance beyond earning them elective non-major credits, but they do come around. Jennifer told me that those who engage and see that the subject area is important start "asking more questions of me, or actually looking at the comments that I've made on assignments; I can see that they care about it." She notes that students start spending more time on their assignments, working late. She states,

if they're emailing later in the evening and being like, "Hey, I'm working on this," you can tell that, that's not primetime for doing work. No one wants to be doing schoolwork at 8 p.m. on a Friday night. It's a feeling like, "Okay, well this person put effort into this."

Jennifer told me that these students see the connections, spend more time, and engage with the course. She said that often the quality of their work improves. But she did note that engagement as related to students identifying with the course does not always mean they have better grades.

Just because they get the meaning of the course doesn't mean they understand every concept or write better.

Grace was more surprised that the students were not better prepared from the onset of the course. She stated:

I thought that they would know more about...I thought...I guess I thought because I knew about it, that students would know how to write a résumé and how to write a cover letter. Simple...well, I say simple. It's not really that simple. I was a little surprised and continue to be, actually, a little surprised at some of the interpretations of things that we get.

Grace stated that many students reported in their introductions that they were taking the course only because it was required. She said that many did grow interested once they saw the applicability of the course content to their future careers. The faculty member wove the meaning of each assignment into the assignment descriptions. Grace told me that they "will have a little blurb that will say, 'When you're applying for jobs, you will use this,' or, 'Think about this when you're applying...' or, 'Use something from a current situation that's going on in your life.'" She told me that there is no busy work. She said, "students can tell when it's just busy work." If a student does not understand the connection, she said that the teaching assistant or faculty member will take time to help them understand. She, too, could tell that students found ways to connect when she had been successful in helping students see the importance of the course.

Grace said,

the ones that did really well and clearly learning from what they...they learned from their mistakes and learned from what we were doing, it was obvious to see that...I could obviously see that they were at least engaged with the subject, if not with me.



When students were able to grow, Grace felt a level of engagement existed.

Vivian told me that it is one of her intentions to help students connect with written communication and the importance of it in their lives. She believes this makes a significant difference in engagement. She finds that for students to be successful in her course it takes engagement with the subject, the ability to reflect about what they are learning, and conscientious building of their skills throughout the course. Students must understand the subject area's importance to themselves in order to improve their work. Finally, Vivian feels that she can see developmental changes within students who engage with the subject matter.

### **Summary**

The premise of this research is that on-campus students who self-identified as being engaged in an online course can provide important insight that helps faculty members and administrators improve courses to better engage students in the future. Through description-rich narratives of the five participants, background information and experiences regarding online courses and engagement were shared. Two of the participants had been enrolled students in the course that binds this case. Two additional participants were teaching assistants who had some experience in online learning themselves. The last participant was the faculty member. The student participants are central to this study, but in order to appreciate the elements that engaged the students, it was important to hear from a variety of perspectives about this course; the variety helped construct a shared meaning for all involved.

Three overarching themes emerged from the interviews. The themes represent elements of the course that engaged students and helped them find value in the course rather than just viewing the course as a means to completing credits for a grade. The first theme was organization. This was an element central to the student participants' successful engagement in

the course, which included well-organized information, clear expectations, appropriate use of the LMS, shortened courses, and purposeful use of course resources. The second theme is that strategic relationships add value to online courses. In this online communications course, student relationships with their teaching assistants was a primary focus. In addition, on-campus student peers helped student participants maintain engagement in the online course. Lastly, course content must be presented as relevant to win over students. Even though the students in this course entered with a dislike – even a hatred – of writing, the faculty member and teaching assistants helped illustrate the practical applications of the course assignments. In the end, the student participants understood the need for mastering the skills taught in the course and the relationship of the course objectives to their own lives.

## **Chapter 5 - Implications and Conclusion**

The purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of multiple participants who all participated in an online communications course, either as students earning on-campus degrees at the same institution, as teaching assistants, or as the faculty member at a mid-sized land grant institution in the midwestern United States. The participants were selected with both criterion- and purposeful-based sampling. The participants' experiences were viewed using the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism posits that individuals' worlds are made of objects that may be physical, social, or abstract. According to Blumer (1969), it is important for the researcher to view the objects as participants see them, or how they personally interpret the object's meaning. The objects in this study are the elements within an online communications course. I asked participants about the elements, or objects, that they perceived as most engaging. They spoke about the objects that have the most meaning and I listened to their interpretation. They brought up both objects to which they reacted positively and objects to which they reacted negatively. My goal as a researcher was to pay attention to those objects that carry the most meaning for participants and to understand how the collective meaning given to events or objects within a course may help educators better understand engagement through the lens or experiences of students.

Utilizing the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, three research questions guided this study:

1. What were the experiences of on-campus students who enrolled in online courses?
2. What aspects of an online course engaged on-campus students?

3. How did the participants discuss their motivation to continue participating in online courses based on previous course engagement?

Through interviews, I collected each participant's interpretation of the abstract notion of "engagement" and these definitions, interestingly, matched those in the literature about engagement from the field of student affairs. Participants felt that engagement encompasses three areas: (1) activity or time spent in a course, (2) comprehension of the subject matter, and (3) interaction with others. Each of these elements reflects the dominant literature of the field from Dewey, Kuh, Bulger, Pascarella, and Terenzini.

### **Unpacking Research Questions**

In qualitative research, the answers to research questions are entangled with one another. My analysis and interpretation of the participants' experiences is viewed through the lens of symbolic interactionism and to speak of each question and response as being unique would devalue the meaning that participants have provided. Nuances and context would be stripped inadvertently by the researcher. The three research questions are therefore examined collectively throughout this chapter. Below, I discuss assertions from the thematic narratives as well as findings in relationship to the literature and application to student affairs practices.

### **Assertions from Thematic Narratives**

After thoroughly analyzing the data, I reviewed it in light of the research questions. The following three assertions became evident:

- Students need to understand the relevancy of their online courses and see that assignments build upon one another and have real world application.
- Faculty and instructional designers should create clearly organized courses utilizing the LMS in order for students to engage in online courses.

- On-campus students need strong relationships with on-campus peers as well as course instructor(s) to feel comfortable taking and fully engaging in online courses.

### **Relevancy of the Online Course and Real-World Application**

Prior to enrolling in the online communications course, student participants enrolled in other online courses because they had to fill electives or complete general education course requirements that were of little interest to them. The courses they chose to take online were, in their minds, not relevant to their majors and the information learned, or not, was not needed as a prerequisite for future courses in their majors. They sought the easiest way to get these courses out of the way quickly and that was by taking them online.

Student participants indicated that the online courses they took were generally easier than in person on-campus courses and listed three reasons for this observation. First, both student participants felt that they already knew the content of the courses they took online fairly well. They had taken advanced courses in high school and were familiar with the subject areas and felt confident that little new knowledge would be required to pass the online courses. For them, the online courses they took were more of a subject review than learning new material. Second, through friends and previous personal experiences, they knew they could take online courses through other institutions that would be less rigorous academically. The undergraduate participants explained that the courses had a transfer equivalency equal to the home institution's on-campus courses, offering the same credits for much less work and far lower expectations.

Student participants shared that they intended to take future online courses only if they were not required for their majors. They still considered online courses to be an easy means to earning course credit for courses they did not like or did not view as important. However, participants indicated that they were not likely to take any more courses online. At the time of

our interviews, the student participants had nearly completed their non-major requirements. One student participant was in an online course, a general campus requirement, and said that was going to be her last online course since the rest of her courses were either required for her major or closely aligned with it.

While not previously engaged with online courses, students did engage with this one, in part because this online communications course illustrated a clear relevancy to how it could positively affect their future. It is difficult to ignore students who openly state that they “hated” a subject area and thus enrolled online to get it over with as soon as possible. These same student participants then finished the course feeling engaged with the course and having a newfound sense of appreciation for the subject area. In this case, the subject area is written communications; both student participants exclaimed multiple times that they did not like writing, and they did not understand why this course was important when they already knew how to write a résumé. From early on, the teaching assistants and faculty member helped the students see why this course was important to their futures. They personalized the course and thus the course became more than a three-credit hour blip on students’ transcripts. The student participants embraced the course and stated that it gave them a useful tool for the future. Students utilized the assignments from the course to apply for real-world jobs and to write real-world emails to sorority members – the applicability of skills gained in the course was obvious to them even months after the course had ended. Unlike other online courses where they immediately forgot or mentally filed away material they had learned, they were actively using skills from this course and planning to continue doing so.

## **Clearly Organized Course Content and Effective Utilization of LMS**

Course organization can be split between the two sub-themes of transparency and the faculty member efficiently utilizing the LMS. Transparency, the first sub-theme, was chosen because the underlying tone of conversation was that the organization of the course left no questions about what was expected, when it was due, and how to accomplish tasks. According to the student participants, the course was transparent. The instructor put everything in the LMS upfront before the course began, focused the messages of her emails on expectations, and did so in a concise manner, according to the two student participants. The faculty member appeared to be cognizant of how important online organization is for students who may or may not be on campus and learning independently. While this may appear to be a relatively logical conclusion for any course environment, it is important to note that the student participants found this course to be far superior to other online courses they had taken. It was not common for their online courses to be well-organized. This suggests that organizational patterns must be developed for online learning that are more transparent than those used in traditional classrooms. Rather than waiting for a faculty member to open up content during the course, students would like to have the entire course in front of them from the beginning to know what lies ahead for them. If that's not possible, at least giving them firm due dates for assignments helps.

The other sub-theme that rose to importance was utilization of the LMS. Today's LMS is a complex program that offers many different views of information through calendars, gradebooks, message boards, and other web tools. Student participants pointed out that while they would like information to be easily accessible, information can be overwhelming when displayed all at once in one place. The student participants appreciated that the online communications course used specific LMS tools that allowed them to select the information they

would like to see on the screen and to hide irrelevant information until it was needed. Given that the student participants felt other faculty members did not use the LMS systems well, it is reasonable to conclude that more LMS training is required on college campuses so that faculty members can become more comfortable using the tools built into the LMS.

### **Relationships with Course Instructor and On-Campus Peers**

The theme of relationships, as shared by the student participants, aligned with engagement literature, which focuses on student relationships with peers and faculty members. The key relationships discussed by the student participants in this case study were those with instructional staff and on-campus peers.

Student participants spoke well of the relationships created with their faculty member and teaching assistants. An early on assignment helped create a comfortable and personal connection between students and teaching assistants. Student participants felt that the introduction assignment made them more comfortable later when asking questions and it led to them trusting the teaching assistants. They felt that the teaching assistants had the students' personal interests in mind when grading work and giving feedback for improvement. This would feed into their overall engagement with the subject area. However, and most importantly, the student participants spoke about the tone the introduction assignment set for the course far before they would become engaged with the subject content. The faculty member and teaching assistants were mindful of the importance of the relationship between the students and the teaching assistants. Once more, student participants noted that their prior online course faculty members had not been attentive to the importance of this relationship and spoke highly about the engagement they felt with their teaching assistants and with the faculty member, who they got to know through her own introduction.



A less expected sub-theme for relationships was the high importance student participants placed on the relationship with their on-campus peers. Even in online courses, on-campus students carry their personal connections with them. Often, student participants spoke about enrolling in courses with their friends so that they could support each other. If that was not an option, they would look at course rosters (if available) and seek campus peers (most often students in their own college) to use as study partners. On-campus peers kept these students engaged and motivated to do well. Student participants noted that they encouraged one another and kept one another accountable for keeping up in the course. Faculty members may want to consider how to leverage this notion for their own courses and offer ways for on-campus students to engage with one another in online courses.

### **The Findings in Relationship to the Literature**

The findings in this qualitative study both connect to the literature in Chapter Two regarding the research questions and purpose for the study and build beyond the literature. The literature reflects primarily researcher and faculty insights, with a few brief quantitative surveys of students, while this research brings the voice of the student to the forefront in the discussion of course engagement. The student participants in this case study, like many of their on-campus peers, chose to move online for some of their coursework with or without the input of their advisors or faculty mentors (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Mann & Henneberry, 2012; Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009). The literature provides a few ideas of why students move online, namely schedule flexibility and the appeal of technology. Some researchers are worried about online enrollment trends, believing that (1) students may not be prepared to learn online (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Bejerano, 2008; J. L. Brown, 2012), (2) that online education is less engaging (Bejerano, 2008), (3) that it can be challenging to help students learn higher level thinking skills

(Bejerano, 2008), and (4) that the lack of physical/social engagement may be detrimental to student engagement (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Previous studies indicate that some students even feel that online education is of poor quality (Bejerano, 2008; Straumsheim, 2016). Finally, student engagement is critical to student learning and progression through their degrees; however, little research has been done tying student engagement theory to online courses. Astin and Tinto provide a solid basic framework of student engagement that can be reviewed in light of the online course in this case study, and the student participants' thoughts seem to concur with Astin and Tinto's theories.

### **Reasons Why Students Move Online**

During the last two decades, several researchers have provided two possible explanations for why on-campus students take online courses: schedule flexibility (Orszag et al., 2015) and the appeal of technology (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Jenkins et al., 2009). Whereas early research pointed to the former reason (Mann & Henneberry, 2012; Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009), emphasizing students' need for a flexible schedule, current literature suggests that the latter is equally important, that students simply appreciate technology as a learning environment (Levine et al., 2012; McHaney, 2011). Asynchronous online courses do not have a set daily starting or ending time and a student can schedule his or her coursework around other schedules.

Schedule flexibility alludes to constraints of time and physical space. McHaney (2011) has suggested that schedule flexibility is more suitable for some students' personalities and learning styles, especially if they wish to be more active at night or in early morning. By putting educational content online, students may access it at any time. Students in the same course may access message boards and content whenever it is optimal for them, yet still share the same

academic space with others (McHaney, 2011), accessing online course information at their convenience with minimal limitations (Dutton et al., 2002; Gebhardt, 2001).

While the two student participants in this case study did not specifically talk about scheduling their online courses to utilize a certain time of day, they did share that they took this intersession course to lighten their load during the spring semester. In addition to speaking about the intersession course, one of the participants reflected that she intentionally takes first eight-week courses online because she can put in a great deal of effort when she's motivated and then have the course over with by the time her on-campus course work increases at the end of the traditional 16-week semester. In addition, she took summer courses online to decrease her time to degree overall.

What became clear when talking to these students was their primary reason for taking courses online had less to do with the convenience of accessing a course and more to do with saving time to focus on courses that they viewed as mattering. Their unique prioritization of courses, deciding the worth of a course based on its relationship to their major, and opting to take courses they viewed as less worthy or less critical online to get them over with is something the literature did not address. The student participants specifically determined that low-priority courses were ones in which they either already felt they had a grasp on the material, or were courses they felt were required electives and therefore not useful for the future. These students' views on course prioritization is unique and not reflected in the literature.

The research indicates that students can spend time accessing some material online as often as they need to if they are weak in an area, or move through other content more quickly than a lecturer may allow if they are already strong in an area (Chamberlin, 2001; Kirtman, 2009; Lei & Gupta, 2010; McHaney, 2011). McHaney (2011) referred to these students as time

shifters, speeding up lectures in their online video player if they know the content already to avoid latency intolerance, which has been defined by Hayes (2008) as the anxiety one has when information is coming much slower than anticipated considering the power of modern technology. The literature indicates that students are scheduling their academic time around activities and are spending as much, or as little, time on academics as they feel is required of them.

One student participant in this case study expressed frustration about watching faculty members on video and not getting the important information she needed to be successful in a course in a short enough time frame. She spoke about speeding up video if it was possible, or not watching the video at all. The other participant seemed to echo this sentiment, saying that if a video was long and “boring,” she wouldn’t watch it. They both appreciated the short videos that were part of the online intersession communications course. Interestingly, while faculty in the literature seem to view video as mandated or integral to online courses, the student participants in this case study felt they learned more without video, prioritizing their relationship with the textbook, the applicability of the assignments, and the feedback they received regularly on their work.

According to the literature, one of the possible reasons to explain increased online enrollments by traditional students is simply that they are more comfortable with the technology than their predecessors; they have a higher acceptance rate of the merit of online education versus course material taught in traditional physical classrooms (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Armatas et al., 2003; Bejerano, 2008; Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2009; Levine et al., 2012; McHaney, 2011; Oblinger et al., 2001). Students today have grown up with collaborative web technologies and social media, making them comfortable with and accepting

of such technology as an appropriate learning environment. Even those traditional students who may not be as embedded in online media are still accepting new modern formats of learning with online tools and they would like to learn with others who know how to use the technology and with faculty members who know how to implement it well (J. L. Brown, 2012; Levine et al., 2012; McHaney, 2011; Schaffhauser, 2015).

While the literature indicates a firm belief that students view online education as having the same merit as material taught in traditional on-campus classrooms, the student participants in this case study disagreed with that sentiment repeatedly. Both student participants and the two teaching assistants prioritized the value of in class interaction and learning. Online courses were viewed as inferior to on-campus courses by all four of them because they did not involve interaction, they missed key pieces of engagement (taking notes while faculty lectured or verbally responding to questions in real time), and participants did not believe the material could be conveyed as effectively online. They felt online was appropriate for review of material they already knew or material they would never need to know in the future.

The literature puts forth that students are comfortable with the technology required for online learning. Interestingly, while students may be comfortable with technology, both student participants in this case study indicated that faculty members' use of the LMS for online courses varied widely in their experiences. They shared that the online communications course which bound this study had excellent use of the LMS and gave specific examples about being able to minimize or view exactly what they needed to. They gave examples of poor use of the LMS in other courses and how that created unnecessary work for them in trying to find key information. Neither student mentioned needing other peers in an online course to know how to use the technology. Although both student participants were comfortable with technology, rather than

turning to others within the course as the literature suggests they might, they seemed more reliant on personal interactions outside the LMS with on-campus peers. The online peers in both the communications course and other courses they had taken did not add value for these students.

Additionally, according to the research, technology allows students the ability to interact with the educational environment on their own terms. Students feel they can more effectively communicate certain topics through online message boards than in a face-to-face discussion (Lei & Gupta, 2010; McHaney, 2011; Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009). Discussing topics online allows for perceived anonymity that is not afforded in a face-to-face lecture, and moving those discussions online reduces personal risks while increasing engagement levels (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2009). Online, unlike in a classroom, students can be required to respond to all questions, which strengthens course discussions, thus increasing students' ownership and responsibility for knowing the content (Chamberlin, 2001; Fredericksen, 2015). Additionally, online education and communication can level the playing field by removing psychological and social barriers to communications between students (with each other or with instructors) (Chamberlin, 2001).

In the online course that bound this study, student participants were not required to utilize the discussion boards for interaction with online peers; only the teaching assistants responded to their comments or reflections. Although one student participant mentioned previous online courses that included required discussion boards, she was more concerned with others not posting on time than she was in content of discussion boards. Neither student in this case study referred to being anonymous online as a benefit. In fact, it became clear that if anonymous peers were reading what they wrote, they would feel uncomfortable. They wanted to know the people who were reading their messages and they wanted to feel certain that their messages would be

interpreted in the way in which they were intended. In some respects, it seemed they would prefer not to post at all rather than have strangers read what they wrote and judge them. They themselves judged online peers, intentionally seeking out those who wrote well or who had a more robust LMS profile. This is another reason that getting to know their teaching assistants up front was so critical for their success in the course. In this course, the teaching assistants stood in for online peers and their personalized feedback, custom-tailored to each student, added value because they built a relationship first with the on-campus students.

### **Online Enrollment Concerns**

Some researchers are worried about online enrollment trends; they believe that: (1) students must be much better disciplined to work online than colleges or universities have prepared them to be (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Bejerano, 2008; J. L. Brown, 2012), (2) that faculty members believe online education is less engaging (Bejerano, 2008), (3) that it can be challenging to help students learn higher level thinking skills (Bejerano, 2008), and (4) that the lack of physical/social engagement may be detrimental to student engagement (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Some students feel that online education is of poor quality (Bejerano, 2008; Straumsheim, 2016); in one survey, 27% of student respondents did not feel that online education was good quality (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2015). Others have proven many of these assumptions are false (Benton et al., 2010) or that it is wrong to compare online and on-campus classroom education because the audience may differ for the two modes (Fredericksen, 2015).

In regards to the suggestion that students must be much better disciplined to work online than colleges or universities have prepared them to be (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Bejerano, 2008; J. L. Brown, 2012), initially, the student participants in this case study seemed to confirm that. They spoke about keeping track of when assignments were due, utilizing personal planners as

well as the LMS calendar system, and were honest about how not putting in the time needed resulted in poor grades. One participant even mentioned that if she took another online course with video, she would need to just plan to sit down and watch the videos at specific times instead of skipping them as she had in a previous course. Even one of the teaching assistant participants mentioned that she was struggling trying to watch videos for an online course, finding herself easily distracted by online social media. However, it became clear as the student participants responded to questions about what engagement meant to them that they both put in the exact same level of work, if not more, for their on-campus courses. For on-campus courses, they took additional steps to print off note sheets, take notes, prepare themselves to respond in class to questions, and to visit faculty during office hours.

The second notion from the research, that faculty members believe online education is less engaging (Bejerano, 2008), seems confirmed by the faculty member in this case study. The faculty member spoke at length about ways in which she set up the course to maximize engagement, specifically utilizing teaching assistants with small assigned learning communities to ensure that students in the course received daily feedback and grading. She created a video of herself introducing herself, required the students to introduce themselves to their teaching assistants, and had the teaching assistants reciprocally introduce themselves to the students. She had consciously taken student feedback from many years of teaching the online intersession course to improve it, removing aspects that caused students to disengage like group work and interactive discussion boards in the form of a blog. She set clear intentional expectations of students from the beginning, ensured that the course was optimally organized, and made sure all the teaching assistants were on the same page with grading rubrics and expectations – all steps that appeared to be over-compensating for a lack of engagement in online teaching.



Interestingly, the faculty member is now mirroring her on-campus course after the online course, flipping the classroom to increase engagement during the 16-week timeframe. This seems to indicate that while the faculty member worked harder upfront to create an engaging online course, she now sees the value of recreating the same high level of engagement in her in person course.

Third, some researchers worry that it can be challenging to help students learn higher-level thinking skills in an online course (Bejerano, 2008). Talking to the student participants in this case study, that did seem to be the case for most of their courses. They intentionally enrolled in online courses in which they felt they already had a command of the subject matter, then engaged at the most basic level in order to complete the course. Even the communications course that bound this case study did not seem to require critical thinking skills as much as it emphasized subject matter acquisition. Students with black-and-white mindsets appreciated how transparent and clear the course objectives were. However, while the two student participants indicated a focus on subject matter mastery, they recognized that the course required them to build skills and then utilize them from one assignment to the next, always growing. The online communications course integrated the higher-level thinking skills so skillfully into the fabric of the course that the students barely noticed they were there.

Fourth, some researchers have asserted that the lack of physical/social engagement may be detrimental to student engagement (Tinto, 1975, 1993). The student participants in this case study definitely confirmed that this was true for them. One student participant indicated the worst part about online courses for her was the lack of social communication and engagement. However, what the literature did not indicate was that students, when lacking the engagement with peers, would find alternative ways to get it in an online course. One student participant in

this case study went so far as to recruit on-campus peers to take this online communications course with her so that she would have a peer group with whom to engage about the course. Both student participants detailed how, during other times when they took online courses, they sought out on-campus students they knew either enrolled concurrently in the online course or who had taken the course previously to provide support and social engagement. The student participants highly prized physical engagement, meeting with their small peer groups in person or over the phone to have real discussions and not relying on texting or email. The literature did not discuss students creating their own engagement in the way that the student participants in this case study so clearly did.

The literature indicates that some students feel that online education is of poor quality (Bejerano, 2008; Straumsheim, 2016). While this opinion may not influence actual enrollments in online courses by students, it is certainly something that needs addressed or remedied if it is true based on the sheer number of students enrolling online each year.

The two student participants in this case study both agreed with the idea that online education as a whole is of lower quality than on-campus education. Both students gave examples of previous courses they had taken and how the material, setup of the courses, and expectations were of lower quality than their on-campus courses. In some ways, however, it seemed as though the students saw the lower expectations and lower quality as a benefit, allowing them to put in less effort and still get the equivalent credit hours needed for graduation. Both student participants stated that they willingly chose not to engage in online courses, thereby mentally opting out before the courses even started.

## **Student Engagement**

Once students are enrolled in online courses, regardless of the reason, it is important that the courses lead to student learning. Student engagement is vital to successful student learning (Carini et al., 2006). When students are engaged with their courses, students increase their chances of successfully meeting learning outcomes. Learning outcomes and student success are increasingly important on college campuses. Ideally, students will learn, stay enrolled, and finish their degree. Any hiccups can lead to poor grades and students getting off track. In today's detailed degree plans, each course is important. Considering that online education is increasingly becoming an indispensable part of higher education, engagement of students in online courses is of the utmost importance (Meyer, 2014).

Literature in the field of student affairs tends to define engagement as how active students are in their academic programs (generally) as well as their involvement in activities on campus (in the department as well as in student life in general). Positive engagement results in better grades, greater student satisfaction, and higher retention (Chen et al., 2008).

The two student participants in this case study both indicated high levels of campus engagement, specifically involvement in their sororities and in their majors. The student participants in this case study demonstrated their high campus engagement in multiple ways. Both expressed a strong desire to either finish their degrees on time or early. Both worked hard to earn "A"s in all courses, even ones they viewed as less valuable. They spoke of being highly satisfied with their on-campus major courses and the engagement within them. Finally, the campus ecology overall is important to these students, especially relationships they have built with peers and faculty through departmental activities.

In addition, engagement can be defined at a course level. A basic definition of classroom engagement could be how much interest a student has in his or her course (Dewey, 1913). Specific classroom engagement, at the micro level, influences student learning outcomes for programs, student satisfaction, and overall college retention (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Carini et al., 2006; Pilotti et al., 2017). George Kuh (2009b), one of the leading figures in engagement theory as related to the practice of student affairs, offers this more elaborate definition of academic engagement in a classroom:

[T]he more students study a subject, the more they know about it, and the more students practice and get feedback from faculty and staff members on their writing and collaborative problem solving, the deeper they come to understand what they are learning. (p. 5)

This definition suggests that students' investment of time, as well as their level of interest, motivation, and participation, leads to positive engagement within a course, resulting in better grades and greater subject comprehension (Bulger et al., 2008; Kuh, 2009b; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Referring to this case study, upon reviewing the two student participants' words and statements about their interest level in their online communications course, it seems clear that initially, they were not interested and not prepared to engage. They both shared other subjects from previous courses, both online and on campus, in which they were not interested (i.e. sociology and anthropology) and emphasized that because the topics were not related to their majors, they did not need to invest a great deal of time learning more about them. However, as the faculty member and teaching assistants of the communications course made the material relevant to the students on a daily basis, the students realized that they did have an interest in the

topic and they felt more motivated to participate and succeed in the course, not just to get the grade they wanted, but to learn the material for their future careers. The faculty member effectively set up the online communications course to capitalize on student interest level, build motivation, and require participation for engagement. While the faculty member's online communications course seems a textbook case for engagement, based on the student participants' feedback about other online courses, none of their previous online courses overcame their desire to disengage like the communications course did. The faculty member of this course is an outlier, not a norm, based on the feedback of the two students.

Alexander Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement plays a role in our understanding of student engagement and its role in retaining students. The term "involvement," as used by Astin, is synonymous with engagement; "engage in" is one of the terms he suggests that captures the intended meaning of "involvement." Astin (1984, p. 519) asserts that "Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination)." When the student participants in this case study were asked about their engagement in courses, both specifically referred to doing the work as required. One referenced doing the problems in a math course as an example of engagement. In light of the online communications course that binds this study, both students spent a great deal of time in our interviews discussing the actual work they did, planning the actual work, and the relief and excitement at completing the work for the course. The teaching assistants and faculty member referred to engagement as completing required assignments and work as well. The quality of the online communications course again proved to be an outlier for the two student participants.

Previous online courses they took did not require the level of work or involvement that this one did.

Per Astin (1984, p. 519), “Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same students manifest different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.” In light of the online communications course in this case study, both student participants felt that they engaged with the work in concentrated and pre-planned productive spurts. One student scheduled time with a peer in the same course to join her at home to work through projects together. The other student participant specifically worked through a number of projects in one day to check them off her list, then had some downtime to focus on upcoming assignments. The students knew that the final week of the course would be high volume and although they tried to plan accordingly, both felt that they gave 100% in the last week of the course, with one even stating that she was most engaged while turning in the greatest amount of work.

According to Astin (1984, p. 519), “Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student’s involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).” As part of this case study, the time that the student participants spent in the LMS was measured and compared to the average of their peers (both spent more than the average time in the course). In addition, both reported that they were focused on completing the assignments and both talked about the fact that they could tell the assignments built upon each other. They noticed that each time a new skill was introduced, the next assignment required that the new skill

be utilized. Because of the time spent in the course by the student participants and the cognitive awareness of assignment complexities they demonstrated, a greater level of engagement appears to have been demonstrated by both student participants in this course.

Astin believes that (1984, p. 519), “The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.” Both student participants in this case study mentioned ways in which they try to engage in courses for their major specifically. One student participant mentioned that she tries to link a course that she may or may not be engaged in with how it may affect her future. For example, she didn’t feel engaged with sociology, but admits that she knows it has a bearing on her ability to work with others and understand them in the future. Both engage in their major by attending courses, meeting with professors, and connecting the courses specific to their majors from one semester to the next. Overall, both student participants self-reported a great deal of engagement in their programs on campus, and their grades reflect this. They are engaged socially, developing as people in their sororities. Finally, they both found ways to connect the online communications course to their future careers and the writing they will do. A good example of this is they both indicated they will keep the textbook as a reference because they’ll need it later.

Finally, Astin (1984, p. 519) states, “The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.” In the online communications course, the faculty member specifically developed the course to increase student involvement. A good example of this is her first assignment, which, to the student participants appeared to only be a beginning of class introduction, but behind the scenes served many purposes from determining students’ familiarity with the LMS to

making sure that students could find the grade rubric after the assignment had been graded. This level of care and detail was evident throughout the course. Thus, although Astin's purpose in developing these tenets of student involvement was not to directly tie them to course engagement, the statements about engagement by two student participants in this case study demonstrate that Astin's work has applicability at the course level.

Vincent Tinto's work on retention and student persistence strengthens the idea of the necessity of classroom engagement. Although his research focuses on the larger college environment and the effects on student retention (first year experiences, personal transitions to college, larger academic goals, and other personal concerns), Tinto recognizes the importance of each classroom (Tinto, 1997, 2012, 2017a, 2017b). Tinto discusses the importance of setting clear expectations, supporting students, providing appropriate assessment feedback, and engaging students' academic needs to increase involvement (Tinto, 2012). Tinto (2017a, p. 5) shares concerns that while engagement starts with curriculum choices, "student motivation to persist is also shaped by student perceptions of the value of what they are being asked to learn." Students will engage less with courses outside their area of study, that do not have meaningful connections with their own lives, and that are of no relevance to their selves or pursuits (Tinto, 2017a).

Tinto's belief in the importance of setting clear expectations, supporting students, providing appropriate assessment feedback, and engaging students' academic needs to increase involvement (Tinto, 2012), as well as his belief that "student motivation to persist is also shaped by student perceptions of the value of what they are being asked to learn" (Tinto, 2017a, p. 5) appears to have been echoed by the faculty member teaching the online communications course in this case study. Even before the course began, she made sure that students knew her



expectations of the three-week course with emails and opening the course early. Each assignment students completed had a thorough grade rubric and the small number of students assigned to each teaching assistant ensured that grading would be equitable and timely. The teaching assistants provided the support students needed to be successful. In addition, the faculty member utilized student feedback from multiple years to develop assignments that were applicable and at the appropriate academic level to help non-major students see the value in the course overall. The two student participants both noticed the clear expectations, the support they received, and the value of the course to their academic needs and both related that these things increased their engagement. Interestingly, Tinto's assertion that students will engage less with courses outside their area of study seemed to ring true in the statements the student participants made about other online courses they had taken. Both devalued courses that did not relate directly to their major or program of study and specifically chose not to engage in those courses in order to save time and energy for courses that were truly important. Due to the hard work of the faculty member of the online communications course, students went from thinking it, too, was a course in which they didn't plan to engage to fully engaging because they saw the value it provided. Recently, Tinto (2017b) stated that research in regards to persistence is primarily written from administrators' viewpoints and that little has been written from the student point of view. It is the goal of this case study research to begin to share some of the missing student point of view in relation to engagement in online courses specifically.

### **Implications and Future Research Possibilities**

Based on the findings in this case study, several implications exist for existing practices as well as for future research. The two traditional on-campus students interviewed for this case study shared their experiences and expectations, which, when compared to the existing literature

and what is missing, lead to some suggestions for faculty, advisors, and administrators, which are detailed below.

## **Faculty**

Faculty and instructional designers should consider the course elements discussed by the two student participants in this case study, both positive and negative, and should seek to understand how well their own online courses are organized. Is the LMS being fully utilized with material sorted by assignment into appropriate tabs? Given student participants' reaction to video use, not watching them or skipping ahead if they are lengthy, faculty members should access their video metrics and review student video use and ask themselves if it aligns with their expectations. If not, they should consider looking at the literature for best practices such as Guo, Kim, and Rubin's research with online courses and video use (2014). Faculty should consider how transparent or clear their course organization is, thinking about whether or not critical due dates are given ahead of time and whether assignment expectations are clearly detailed with grading rubrics visible at the beginning of the course.

In addition to course organization, student participants indicated a higher level of engagement with project-based learning. While project-based learning, especially focused on a student's individual interest or major, is more time consuming to provide guidance on and to grade, another practice utilized in the online communications course, the use of teaching assistants, could easily overcome that issue. In addition, teaching assistants can create another avenue of engagement with students.

As faculty think about what course resources could better facilitate project-based learning and lower or remove the amount of video utilized in a course, they should think about creating a custom textbook or an open educational resource that students can use for the course. Based on

feedback from the student participants here, resources that tie directly to the student learning outcomes and are specific to the course are much appreciated. In addition, low cost materials are appreciated by students.

Since students are not in a physical classroom, and because they may be taking online courses that are outside of their major, the information must be taught in such a way that students clearly understand the effect of the course on their future studies. Students must be able to clearly apply the concepts being taught to their own experiences or their engagement in the course weakens.

Finally, as faculty consider replacing organic classroom conversation with online message boards, thought might be given as to the purpose of the message boards. Is the intent to encourage students to engage in specific questions or thoughts related to the student learning outcomes? If so, would they engage better in a written assignment format; would a reflection paper accomplish the same thing? What value is there in having students respond each week to a certain number of message board posts? Is the quality equal to the responses gathered in a physical classroom, and if not, what other modality could be utilized to encourage higher level thinking skills by students?

### **Advisors**

One of the teaching assistants made an astute comment that she didn't think advisors were accurately reflecting the work required in the online communications course to students. As advisors talk to students about taking online courses, it is important that advisors reflect how every course is important in a student's program of study. If students feel they already know the material in a biology course, perhaps an advisor could suggest a course in another department or area in which the student doesn't already have knowledge, or the advisor could refer the student

to a credit-by-examination process at the institution whereby the student could demonstrate the knowledge without taking a time-consuming and costly course.

In addition to providing guidance on course selections that will be engaging to students, advisors can help on-campus students who intend to take online courses with tips and tricks on how to engage in online courses. The two student participants in this case study talked at length about staying organized and keeping on top of assignments and due dates. They talked about using self-talk as necessary to remind themselves of how a course might relate to their future. Guiding students to look for skills or material taught in an online course that they might need again in the future is critical for students to see value in the course. The student participants discussed creating relationships with the faculty or teaching assistant of a course as important to engagement. Finally, if students need motivated, getting a peer or members of a peer group to join them in the online course seemed effective for the students in this case study.

### **Administrators**

Administrators are focusing more on enrollment management as on-campus enrollment declines each year. With the growing number of online courses serving both online and on-campus students, administrators would do well to remember that the two populations are different and have different needs. Staffing a central teaching and learning center appropriately or hiring more instructional designers to assist faculty with learning how to use the LMS and create quality courses is imperative if online is to grow and engage students across the academy. In addition to providing faculty with resources and best practices, administrators can find ways to ensure that all students are prepared to learn online, thinking about ways to integrate online learning skills in freshmen-level courses across the university.

Another important area for administrators to consider is that of academic honesty. Student participants in this study indicated that they collaborated with peers in on-campus courses when tests did not require a proctor. Expectations of academic honesty should be effectively communicated to students with specific examples of what is dishonest. In addition, administrators may wish to require the use of proctors or in the case of paper writing, a plagiarism-recognizing software at the university level. While there is an additional cost for both, ensuring that students are responsible for their own grades will help them engage upfront. Students will realize learning the material on their own is more important than relying on group resources if there are not opportunities for them to utilize group resources.

### **Future Research**

In addition to implications for existing practices, this case study has revealed many areas where future research can assist with better understanding and increasing student engagement in online courses. The participants in this case study were all extroverted Caucasian females. Future research might focus on other populations and their engagement in online courses. For example, understanding what elements engage introverts would be useful. Any input from diverse participants would add to the student perspectives captured in this case study.

More research is needed regarding ways to teach course material that do not utilize video; the student participants in this case study felt they learned more without video, prioritizing instead their relationship with the textbook, the applicability of the assignments, and the feedback they received regularly on their work. Researching additional methods to teach material that engage students would give faculty and instructional designers more techniques to utilize in building engaging online courses.

When reviewing critical opinions of online learning, some researchers stated that online learners must be better disciplined to work online, and that traditional on-campus students did not have the preparation to learn in an independent environment (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Bejerano, 2008; J. L. Brown, 2012). One possible reason for why the student participants became engaged with the online communications course was their personal level of organization and discipline. Both student participants made comments about how their personal organizational habits led them to being engaged with the online course. The teaching assistants and faculty member expected students to be well-organized in order to keep up with the course. One of the items that may predetermine a student's ability to engage with online learning may be a student's organizational habits themselves. I would suggest that research be done not only on students who report that they engage with a course, but on those who do not, comparing their organizational habits to find out what skills are needed for students to be successful.

Another recommendation for future research is course rigor. Student participants mentioned being motivated to take online courses because they were easier. Through experience, they learned that certain courses at certain institutions were much less rigorous. There stands a possibility that the online modality provides a better learning platform for these courses, or that faculty members simply change their expectations for online courses. In some instances, different faculty members teach each modality and therefore have different expectations. Either way, the perception of students is that online learning is easier in many cases. This course was an exception. Researching whether supposedly equivalent online courses at different institutions have different levels of rigor could help in identifying whether courses really should be considered equivalent.

Lastly, students are technologically savvy and online courses provide more means to cheat on courses. It is important to learn more about how students are using technology online in their courses and how that technology may be used dishonestly for better grades. Rather than seek this information to catch possible cheating, faculty members should seek ways to build courses that make it more difficult for students to cheat. These student participants told me that because this course was project-based, and because the teaching assistants knew their personal goals, the projects became personal. These were projects that students were not likely to cheat on. Not only would it be apparently incongruous for a student to write about something different from their previously-stated passion, but the course situated itself as helping students achieve long term goals. There was little reason for them to cheat considering that they were working on personal projects that would later be useful in applying for a job. However, when students didn't see the larger value of an assignment, like the quizzes in this course, they did collaborate inappropriately.

### **Limitations of Current Study**

The course chosen for this case was an online course with high on-campus student enrollment. This increased the possible pool of participants and it appeared to be a popular course for on-campus students. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a course that was geared primarily to students in the same college in which it was taught, meeting a college elective requirement. Neither of the student participants were majoring in the same department that taught the course, but both were in similar programs within the college. This increased the likelihood that students would engage, on some level, with the subject matter. It was geared toward students with their common background. When this study is replicated, it should be focused on a course with enrollments from all colleges across the institution.

It was important to interview students who found this course engaging in order to find out what elements of the course engaged them most. If students had not been engaged, it would have been impossible to talk about engaging elements. What is limiting this study is that I did not consider their motivation to be engaged when they enrolled in the study. Both student participants were motivated to be engaged by their drive to maintain high GPAs. They started the course wanting to do well. Although they did not like writing, they understood that the course may be valuable in their chosen roles on campus and in their future careers. Amber told me directly that “when I hang my hat on something I try.” She puts out her best effort to make sure that she does well. She may not be engaged, but she is motivated to get a good grade in the course and to do so, she is more likely to find a way to engage with the course. Had this study included students who were engaged, but who were not motivated from the onset of the course to do well, the results may have been different. It is possible that other aspects of the course helped them find value. Future research should include students who were less motivated to get high grades, who did not do well in the course but who reported being engaged, or who were not engaged with the course at all to compare results.

Another limitation was my inexperience as a first-time researcher. My initial interviews collected useful data, but as I read the interview transcripts, I realized that I did not flesh out some of the responses and get as much detail as I could have. In my later interviews, I had developed the skills to listen attentively and then break down participants’ answers with additional detail questions. I learned to give myself more time between interviews in order to read each interview thoroughly to create follow-up questions. My follow-up question skills improved over time, I became a better listener, and my interview style became much more polished.



The time between interviews may be an additional limitation of this study. Student participants were interviewed during the spring semester in March. Graduate teaching assistants and the faculty member were interviewed in October through January. On one hand, stretching the interviews out meant that the data collected in spring was no longer fresh in my mind in the fall. In order to appropriately situate myself in the data, I needed to re-read transcripts closely and in some cases listen to the audio in order to understand the emotion being expressed. On the other hand, I was able to review data collected in spring many times and look at preliminary categories before honing my interview questions for the teaching staff. The distance between interviews allowed me to create better questions that reflected how the course was perceived rather than simply my own personal point of view. An example of this is the question, “Think about the course content, the subject matter. Tell me what your perception was of student knowledge of the subject matter prior to their enrolling in the course?” My previous focus was on course elements used in the course by student participants. I re-read the student participants’ transcripts and became aware of the importance of the faculty member’s perceptions of student knowledge as to how that may shape the course and the faculty member’s interactions with students during the course. This question ended up yielding significant data.

### **Significance**

This study is significant in that it fills a gap in the literature addressing engagement in online courses from the students’ point of view. This study used the framework of symbolic interactionism to view a course through the lived experiences of students and the intentions of teaching assistants and the faculty member rather than looking at the course as a pedagogical framework. Current engagement literature focuses primarily on the college ecology (the environment outside of the classroom), or the general engagement of a student’s plan as a group

of courses rather than investigating elements within a course itself. The literature focuses on engagement within cohorts, in on-campus courses by on-campus students, and in online courses by distance students, but does not consider engagement of on-campus students in online courses that were not designed with them in mind. Given the growing number of enrollments online by on-campus students, we can no longer ignore the effect those courses may have on students' overall academic success.

The rising student enrollment numbers in online courses illustrates just how critical elements of course engagement are within online courses that on-campus students are taking. Engagement in an online course is key in students' ability to succeed, from learning material to successfully completing the course with the grade needed to continue on in their programs and graduate. If engagement is not built into courses intentionally, students will struggle to meet student learning outcomes.

This study confirms best practices, with one of the most critical for student success being course organization. While this may appear to be a logical outcome – organization is always important to students – the more clearly a course is organized and easy it is to access, the better students will be able to engage. Along those lines, students appreciate short online courses. With lectures absent from the curriculum, students need clear expectations and solid instruction through a textbook and other course documents. On-campus students are used to being told in class when assignments are due or what are critical expectations for their work. When these students are online, they need to receive regular email communications and the same communication needs to be clearly stated through the LMS.

A surprising element in online course engagement that arose while talking to students was their emphasis on the textbook, custom-written for the course, as a key resource. With the

rising cost of professional textbooks and the fact that students do not see value in generic one-size-fits-all writing, the feedback from the two student participants in this case study indicates that low-cost custom textbooks or even open educational resources are favored and provide great value. Not only do students find value in it, they plan to keep the textbook that serves as a resource for the future.

Finally, although students are in an online environment, they still rely on their on-campus friends and resources to succeed online. They are not as likely to engage with online peers unless they understand and perceive commonalities with them. Being on campus together is a significant strength they depend upon to build peer relationships. Collaboration is important for these students, but they collaborate on their own terms and are not likely to appreciate collaboration with online peers who they do not know.

### **Summary**

This case study was developed with the intention of adding to the body of engagement literature by focusing on the intersection of on-campus students with online learning, an area that has not been explored previously with such intentionality. The number of on-campus students enrolling in online courses is significant (Seaman et al., 2018). Knowing that positive engagement at all levels supports student success and campus retention rates (Kuh, 2009b; Meyer, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005), it is vital that faculty members understand ways to improve engagement in online courses.

This case study highlighted the importance of course engagement and specifically illustrated the importance of course organization, course relationships, and course relevance in helping students learn to embrace the subjects they are studying online. Most importantly, this research shared engagement information in the student participants' own words.

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## **Appendix A - Interview Guide Student Participants**

There will be three open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted in a conversational nature during the course of the study. Each interview will be 45 to 60 minutes in length. Broadly speaking, the questions will be used for guiding questions during the three interviews. Not all questions will be answered in one interview. It is the intent of the researcher to explore the responses in-depth for at least three open-ended questions per interview. However, depending on how the participant elaborates upon each question, the interviewer will have to remain flexible. Therefore, the questions that remain unanswered after the first interview will guide the second and the third interviews. Due to the semi-structured, open-ended conversational nature of the interviews, probes will be used based upon participants' responses to further explore their answers in-depth after asking a broad, open-ended guiding question. Some probes can be pre-determined and they are listed below. Other probes will emerge as a result of what the participant shares. However, all probes and questions will be broadly informed by the following questions.

1. Tell me about the first time you decided to enroll in the online version of [the communications course] in as much detail as you can.

### **Probes to explore**

Reasons for enrolling in the online version of the course  
Prior experiences with online courses  
Decision-making process for enrolling online  
Fit of online course into program of study

2. Think about a time of the semester when you felt most engaged with your online course and tell me about it in as much detail as you can.

### **Probes to explore**

How the student felt engaged in her course  
What happened as a result of that engagement  
How invested the student was in an online course compared to an on-campus course  
Shared definition of engagement between researcher and participant

3. Walk me through your first week (in the online course).

### **Probes to explore**

Academic interaction with course peers  
Academic interaction with faculty member  
Informal interaction with course peers  
Informal interaction with faculty member  
Navigating the LMS  
Description of communication via LMS, email, phone, and social media  
Registration for the course



Interactions with advisors and academic mentors

4. Tell me about a time when you experienced some challenges.

**Probes to explore**

Academic interaction with course peers

Academic interaction with faculty member

Informal interaction with course peers

Informal interaction with faculty member

Navigating the LMS

Interactions with advisors and academic mentors

5. Write out a timeline of your experiences in the online course from enrolling to getting your grade with critical milestone events on it. Tell me about the milestones on your timeline.

**Probes to explore**

What made each event important?

Academic interaction with course peers

Academic interaction with faculty member

Informal interaction with course peers

Informal interaction with faculty member

Interactions with advisors and academic mentors

Sense of belonging

Sense of isolation

Support systems

Academic and informal networks across institution (peers, study tables, tutoring, academic coaches)

6. Tell me what contributed to your successful completion of this course?

**Probes to explore**

Relationships with people inside and outside of the course

Support systems

Challenges faced

Methods student used to overcome challenges

Motivation to engage with the course and members of the course

7. Are there examples of experiences from your background that motivated you to take and be successful in online courses?

**Probes to explore**

Experiences with fully online courses

Experience with an LMS

Experience with online technology and social media

Academic resources and history in the program

Importance of this course in the student's academic program of study

8. Tell me about some support systems you relied on while taking this online course. Discuss how the support system helped you in as much detail as you can.

**Probes to explore**

Supporting university resources

Peer networks

Extracurricular resources

Time spent in addition to required classroom activities and assignments

Shared definition of support systems

9. Think about the course content, the subject matter. Tell me what you knew about the course before enrolling and if you were interested in the subject?

**Probes to explore**

Interest in the subject matter prior to start of the course

Relationship of subject matter to student's academic plan of study

History of taking courses with similar subject matter

Experience with indirect communication such as asynchronous video lectures

10. Tell me about your interactions with the online instructor.

**Probes to explore**

Tools used to directly, independently, interact with instructor

Experiences communicating with instructor

Course resources used to communicate with students

11. Describe your interactions with other students in your course.

**Probes to explore**

Tools used to directly, independently, interact among students

Experiences communicating with students

Course resources used to communicate with other students

12. Is there anything you want to share with me about your experiences of being an on-campus student in an online course that I have not yet asked?

## **Appendix B - Interview Guide Faculty Participant**

There will be three open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted in a conversational nature during the course of the study. Each interview will be 45 to 60 minutes in length. Broadly speaking, the questions will be used for guiding questions during the three interviews. Not all questions will be answered in one interview. It is the intent of the researcher to explore the responses in-depth for at least three open-ended questions per interview. However, depending on how the participant elaborates each question, the interviewer will have to remain flexible. Therefore, the questions that remain unanswered after the first interview will guide the second and the third interviews. Due to the semi-structured, open-ended, conversational nature of the interviews, probes will be used based upon participants' response to further explore their answers in-depth after asking a broad open-ended guiding question. Some probes can be pre-determined and they are listed below. Other probes will emerge as a result of what the participant shares. However, all probes and questions will be broadly informed by the following questions.

1. Tell me about the first time you decided to teach the online version of [the communications course].

### **Probes to explore**

Reasons for teaching the online version of the course  
Prior experiences with online courses  
Fit of the course into the department

2. Walk me through your process in designing the online version of [the communications course] in as much detail as you can.

### **Probes to explore**

Intended audience of [the communications course]  
Purposeful engagement elements within [the communications course]  
Tools used to facilitate [the communications course]

3. Tell me about a time you changed or updated something in your course to better meet student needs.

### **Probes to explore**

How the instructor measured student engagement  
How the instructor communicated with students  
What original elements of the course were used  
What new elements were added to the course

4. Think about a time during the course when you felt students were most engaged with your online course and tell me about it in as much detail as you can.

### **Probes to explore**

How did the faculty member measure student engagement in her course

What happened as a result of that engagement  
How invested were students as compared to an on-campus course  
Shared definition of engagement between researcher and participant

5. Walk me through your first week (in the online course).

**Probes to explore**

Academic interaction of students with course peers  
Academic interaction of students with faculty member  
Informal interaction of students with course peers  
Informal interaction of students with faculty member  
Description of communication via LMS, email, phone, and social media  
Navigating the LMS

6. Tell me about a time when you experienced some challenges as the faculty member in this course.

**Probes to explore**

Academic interaction of students with course peers  
Academic interaction of students with faculty member  
Informal interaction of students with course peers  
Informal interaction of students with faculty member  
Navigating the LMS

7. Think about the course content, the subject matter. Tell me what your perception was of student knowledge of the subject matter prior to their enrolling in the course?

**Probes to explore**

Interest in the subject matter prior to start of the course  
Relationship of subject matter to students' academic plans of study  
Student history of taking courses with similar subject matter

8. Tell me what contributed to successful student completion of this course?

**Probes to explore**

Relationships with people inside and outside of the course  
Support systems  
Challenges faced  
Methods students used to overcome challenges  
Differences in experience with online course and past on-campus courses

9. Tell me about your interactions with the students in the course.

**Probes to explore**

Tools used to directly, independently, interact with students

Experiences communicating with students

Course resources used to communicate with students

Differences in experience with online course and past on-campus courses

10. Is there anything you want to share with me about your experiences of instructing on-campus students in an online course that I have not yet asked?

## **Appendix C - Interview Guide Teaching Assistant Participants**

There will be three open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted in a conversational nature during the course of the study. Each interview will be 45 to 60 minutes in length. Broadly speaking, the questions will be used for guiding questions during the three interviews. Not all questions will be answered in one interview. It is the intent of the researcher to explore the responses in-depth for at least three open-ended questions per interview. However, depending on how the participant elaborates each question, the interviewer will have to remain flexible. Therefore, the questions that remain unanswered after the first interview will guide the second and the third interviews. Due to the semi-structured, open-ended, conversational nature of the interviews, probes will be used based upon participants' response to further explore their answers in-depth after asking a broad open-ended guiding question. Some probes can be pre-determined and they are listed below. Other probes will emerge as a result of what the participant shares. However, all probes and questions will be broadly informed by the following questions.

1. Tell me about the first time you decided to assist in teaching the online version of [the communications course].

### **Probes to explore**

Reasons for assisting in teaching the online version of the course  
Prior experiences with online courses  
Fit of the course into the department

2. What did your role of teaching assistant consist of?

### **Probes to explore**

Managing communications with students  
Managing message boards  
Facilitating conversations between students

3. Walk me through your role in the design process for the online version of [the communications course] in as much detail as you can.

### **Probes to explore**

Intended audience for [the communications course]  
Purposeful engagement elements within [the communications course]  
Tools used to facilitate [the communications course]

4. Tell me about a time when you were involved with changing or updating something in the course to better meet student needs.

### **Probes to explore**

How the teaching assistant measured student engagement  
How the teaching assistant communicated with students  
What original elements of the course were used

What new elements were added to the course

5. Think about a time during the course when you felt students were most engaged with the online course and tell me about it in as much detail as you can.

**Probes to explore**

How did you measure student engagement in the course

What happened as a result of that engagement

How invested were students as compared to in an on-campus course

Shared definition of engagement between researcher and participant

6. Walk me through your first week (in the online course).

**Probes to explore**

Academic interaction of students with course peers

Academic interaction of students with faculty member

Informal interaction of students with course peers

Informal interaction of students with faculty member

Description of communication via LMS, email, phone, and social media

Navigating the LMS

7. Tell me about a time when you experienced some challenges as a teaching assistant in this course?

**Probes to explore**

Academic interaction of students with course peers

Academic interaction of students with faculty member

Informal interaction of students with course peers

Informal interaction of students with faculty member

Navigating the LMS

8. Think about the course content, the subject matter. Tell me what your perception was of students' knowledge of the subject matter prior to their enrolling in the course?

**Probes to explore**

Interest in the subject matter at the start of the course

9. Tell me what contributed to successful student completion of this course?

**Probes to explore**

Relationships with people inside and outside of the course

Support systems

Challenges faced

Methods students used to overcome challenges

10. Tell me about your interactions with the students in the course.

**Probes to explore**

Tools used to directly, independently, interact with teaching assistant

Experiences communicating with instructor

Course resources used to communicate with students

11. Is there anything you want to share with me about your experiences of instructing on-campus students in an online course that I have not yet asked?



## Appendix D - Data Collection Timeline

Table 5.1

*Data Collection Timeline*

Dates	Project Item	Participant's role
Week 1	IRB Approval Received	None
Week 2	Meet with Registrar's Office for list of students enrolled in course.	None
Week 3	Contact students in course by email	Respond to emails to become aware of project and confirm engagement in course
Weeks 4-6	Contact additional students in course by email Set up meetings with participants Provide participants with consent form Meet with participants and collect data via interview Journaling Transcribe interview Preliminary coding	Respond to emails to become aware of project and confirm engagement in course Confirm date and location Sign form Meet with researcher and respond to verbal questions None None None
Weeks 7-11	Contact additional students in course by email Provide participants with consent form Set up meetings with participants Meet with participants and collect data via interview Journaling Transcribe interview Preliminary coding Member check with participants	Respond to emails to become aware of project and confirm engagement in course Sign form Confirm date and location Meet with researcher and respond to verbal questions None None None Respond to transcripts and discuss salient themes with researcher
Weeks 11-12	Preliminary coding Contact additional students in course by email Journaling Peer debriefing	None Respond to emails to become aware of project and confirm engagement in course None None
Week 13	Submit new IRB request adding additional participants Contact additional students in course by email Journaling	None Respond to emails to become aware of project and confirm engagement in course None

Week 14	Contact additional students in course by email Journaling	Respond to emails to become aware of project and confirm engagement in courses None
Week 15	Member check with participants  Debrief participants IRB Approval for additional participants Journaling	Respond to transcripts and discuss salient themes with researcher Receive IRB information None None
Weeks 16-24	Transcript analysis and coding Journaling	None None
Weeks 25-35	Peer debriefing with committee members Write new research questions for additional participants Journaling	None None None
Weeks 36	Contact faculty member to request interview and list of teaching assistants. Request permission to view data regarding the student's time spent in their course Contact teaching assistants for course via email.	Respond to emails to become aware of project and confirm availability  Respond to email and provide permission  Respond to email and confirm availability
Week 37-40	Set up meetings with new participants Provide participants with consent form Meet with participants and collect data via interview Journaling Transcribe interview Preliminary coding	Confirm date and location  Sign form  Meet with researcher and respond to verbal questions None None None
Weeks 40-41	Meet with participants and collect data via interview Transcribe interview Member check with participants Debrief participants	Meet with researcher and respond to verbal questions None Discuss salient themes with researcher Receive IRB information
Weeks 41-48	Transcript analysis and coding Begin writing data analysis	None None
Week 49	Member check with participant  Debrief participant	Respond to transcripts and discuss salient themes with researcher. Receive IRB information
Weeks 50-54	Continue with data analysis Finalize write-up of study	None None